

# DOCTOR WHO

THE BOOK OF THE STILL



PAUL EBBS

BBC

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*The Unnoticed are bound to keep themselves isolated from all history, or face a complete collapse from existence.*

The Book of the Still is a lifeline for stranded time travellers – write your location, sign your name and be instantly rescued. When the Unnoticed learn that within the book someone has revealed both their existence and whereabouts they are forced into murderous intercession to find it.

Fitz knows where it is, but then he's the one who stole it. Carmodi, addicted to the energies trapped in frequent time travellers, also knows where it is. But she's the one who's stolen Fitz. Anji, alone on a doomed planet, trying to find evidence of a race that has never had the decency to exist, doesn't know where anybody is.

Embroided in the deadly chase, the Doctor is starting to worry about how many people he can keep alive along the way. . .

*This is another in the series of original adventures for the Eighth Doctor.*

The Book of the Still

Paul Ebbs

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## Prologue

## About the Author

## About the Other Author

## Epilogue

*‘Epilogue? At the beginning? Style-over-content gross-out, compadre.’*

*‘It’s a story about time travel; dreck like this happens all the time. . . He’s all about style. You don’t remember who I was. You don’t remember what I contained.’*

*You don’t remember what I’ve lost.’*

Money is not the root of all Evil. Subjectivity is.

Describing anything as bad is dependent on where you were standing at the time. That’s *the* universal constant.

Don’t you dare accuse me of facile relativism. Don’t you *dare*. You’re the one who mentioned ‘evil’ and so of course I’m going to say this, because I’m not some vacuum-eyed ‘Nothing is real’ kid from the twenty-third Church of the Copenhagen Interpretation. I know what I’m talking about. I know because again and again my head’s been roughly twisted to stare at the consequences of actions before the events that caused them took place. You probably think that time travelling is a glamorous escapade, all heartbeats, breathlessness and big chandeliers. *It isn’t*. It’s a three a.m. trawl through the cat litter of history using your bare hands as shovels. Have your sensibilities put through that, call me facile again, and we’ll finish this conversation.

So in the meantime, who shall we say is evil?

Who shall we put down as the villain of ‘The Book of the Still’?

Is it the man who snatched away from me the only pure thing I could ever know? The man who steps on to your life like he needs

somewhere to wipe his feet? Who writes indecipherable graffiti on the bones of your existence?

Treating your timeline as a real-world representation of the universe's own built-in obsolescence. . .

You know who I'm talking about. Yes, he's a pretty, pretty boy, and yes, he arrives like a shiver in your life, with his goose-pimple eyes and heart-string lips. When you get close to him he smells of rice paper and rainy days. Well, he did when I met him. By the time we parted, the smell was of orange groves, freshly printed books and an illegal backstreet autopsy. The mere fact that he *can* change the way he smells seemingly at will, should have warned me off in 6

Epilogue

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the first place. By the end, it got to the point where I didn't want to have to look at him at all. Being delight wrapped up in velvet and having a dining room made of chocolate are no real substitutes for someone mundane that doesn't leave behind a trail of wrecked planets and bad cases of heartbreak.

Someone like Fitz. Although I could easily see Fitz as responsible for what happened to me, in the way that you might put the blame for a burglary on a housemate who left the door unlocked rather than on the burglar. But I won't, because I loved him so much. And whether he liked it or not, he loved me as well.

I don't narrate the story that follows. This means that the Doctor will probably look like some sort of hero, until about halfway through anyway. It also means that I will probably come out as a selfish bitch who gets everyone around her killed or abused. I tell you I'm not.

I'm not.

I just did some bad things for the right reasons.

Actually, that's a lie. I did some right things for very bad reasons. Bugger it, I don't know why I did *half* the things I did. Repentance is an effort I'm not willing to make right now.

There used to be so much in my life, so much to look forward to, a heady mix of expectant euphoria and certain destiny. Then I almost reached the moment when the reason for my existence would self-



actualise – and he stole it.

This is a political broadcast on behalf of the Injured Party.

What this *isn't*, is a treatise on the nature of heroism. I don't care what you think of me in the end. Everything that was ever important to me has been excavated and at the moment there's nothing left for anyone to care *about*.

That may sound hollow but then, so am I, now.

*Hollow.*

Your natural reaction may be to slap and shake anyone who writes about her own emotions in goddamned *italics*. I know that before this started I would have, so I can't really blame you if you do.

I don't know if you're buying this. After all, I don't know where you're standing.

Stand to attention. Stand up straight. Stand still.

I'm Carmodi Litian. I don't know who you are.

Obligatory Spectacular Opening

At fifty kilometres high, the curve of baby-blue planet faded to white at the edges of space.

He fell towards the city – a lace of sparkling lights on the edge of the penin-sula. The rubberised linen of the suit hugging the contours of his body; helmet and faceplate covering his head in sleek, flexible, transparent steel.

On the inside of the visor, a wavering targeting-spot trembled over the lights of the city. As he fell, the green dot began to crawl slowly up the inner curve and away from its target. He trimmed his feet slightly, and used his left hand as a rudder to guide the dot back to the centre of the visor. This odd angle was sustained until the buffeting of the silent wind abated. Then slowly and gracefully he brought his arm back into the sleek hollow of his side and extended his toes back out towards the heavens.

It did not feel like falling to begin with. The world was too big, too wide, too massive in his vision, making him so tiny that no amount of falling could impress upon his distance from the ground.

security sweep 12344|||\ znkl23. Sentinels alpha gamma thru servitor plural j

< begin> light dome secure – report series < begin> Transept – wave patency full.

Cross beam – wave patency full.

Tower structure – wave patency full.

< end>

*It hung in the darkness. A hulk. A blackness deeper than the surrounding night.*

*It was part of the shadow. Intrinsically an absence of light.*

Twenty-five kilometres to go. Trimming parts of his body to keep the targeting-spot dead centre. The lace of light; the city, was now growing. Concentrations of white were unbuckling into individual points of brilliance as more detail spread out below him.

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Obligatory Spectacular Opening

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With a euphoric yelp, he burst through a stratum of bubbling cloud, a fine dusting of ice snap crystallising on to his visor. He concentrated on the Thinkswitch™ nodes glued to his temples and the micro-thin elements of the visor's heat web coaxed the ice into a brief cloud of vapour. For a moment, he had a comet's tail of refreezing ice. Then with a puff of white he left it behind.

Now the world was growing, right out of his vision. Perspectives changed as the sheer *sphericity* of the planet was tugged out into flat expanse of land and water. Soon he would have to turn his head to see the fading horizons.

security sweep 12345|||\ znkl28. Sentinels alpha gamma thru servitor plural j

< begin> light dome secure – report series < begin> Transept – wave patency full.

Cross beam – wave patency full.

*Tower structure – wave patency compromised. Avian signature.*

*Dispatch.*

*(Whoosh. Squawk. Whoosh)*

*< end >*

*It silently slipped back into the holding bay with a brief breath from its reaction jets. Internal furnaces had already cooked the bird into a charred relic, now the grav-crushers worked on the tiny corpse until it was a pile of fine soot. A low hum drifted from the blackness, one which the manufacturer would have called Servitor Motor Charge Down, but to all other intents and purposes sounded just like mechanical satisfaction.*

*A silver extensor tube lanced silently towards the outboard disposal unit and the warm powder was quickly deposited.*

*The entire action had taken one point four six seconds.*

*The projected altimeter blurred as it rotated in the corner of the visor. Fifteen kilometres. Serious buffeting was making it harder for him to maintain course.*

*Currents and convections from the hot city were interfacing with the calmer air streams that he had been falling through. Constantly trimming his limbs to keep on target, the realisation of just how aerodynamic his body was pleased him.*

*A tiny frisson of regret blossomed in his chest, overcoming him with a rush of melancholy, as he realised that in all his life he had never before skydived 10*

*The Book of the Still*

*purposefully. This was such a liberating experience. Just him, the air, and the ground. He had a very real sense of having missed out.*

*security sweep 12345|||\ znkl28. Sentinels alpha gamma thru servitor plural j*

*< begin > light dome secure – report series < begin > Transept – wave patency full.*

*Cross beam – wave patency full.*

*Tower structure – wave patency full.*

< end >

Two thousand metres to go. Roughly, twenty seconds of falling left. The night time city was now a sprawl of decay and high art, as if the architects of Lebenswelt had designed and engineered the most fabulous buildings and then built them from garbage and rotting vegetables.

Somewhere in his hind-brain, survival instincts were kicking in, amines and corticals were flooding into his panic centres causing an ugly flower of anxiety to unfurl in his gut. He swallowed hard as the city rushed towards him. Under the normal rules of skydiving, it would be about now that that he would start fumbling for a ripcord.

*Perhaps next time I'll try this with a parachute.*

The targeting-spot hovered over the central tower of the museum.

He

could pick out the buildings and the cloisters clustered around its base, the ramshackle porters' lodges with their electric barbed-wire-topped walls and mined entranceways.

The sextons' and proctors' quarters were clearly visible at one thousand metres, the neat rows of nightshade and hemlock groves hemming in the limestone turrets. The whole museum exuded a stench of denied knowledge and hoarded wonder.

Through the blur of the whirling altimeter, he fell towards the tower, swallowing the thick phlegm of anxiety that collected in the roof of his mouth, forcing the panic into the recesses of his consciousness. He adjusted his attitude just one last time, as the tower grew larger, filling his visor with its unsightly beauty. He couldn't afford to miss the correct altitude – his mission and his life depended on it.

His left hand crawled across his chest, then over his stomach. As the tower filled his vision, the whirling altimeter spun and spun and spun.

Obligatory Spectacular Opening

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For all its incredible technology, the creators of the suit to which he'd entrusted his life had not been able to design away the need for a Big Red Button.

When the bitter taste of fear is welling up in your mouth, breathing has slipped your mind, and, oh, a museum is hurtling towards your head at ninety metres per second, a Big Red Button is a *totally* necessary adjunct to overwhelming panic. A Big Red Button was just what he needed right now.

‘Stop the world. I want to get on.’

Sixteen point three four metres.

Tucking his knees and rolling through one hundred and eighty degrees, he thumped the Big Red Button.

*security sweep 12346|||\ \ znkl28. Sentinels alpha gamma thru servitor plural j*

*< begin> light dome secure – report series < begin> Transept – wave patency full.*

*Cross beam – wave patency full.*

*Tower structure –*

*< discontinuity>*

*Tower structure –*

*< tick-tock>*

*< Structure Compromised. Attack? Emergency Dispatch>*

*< begin warfare subroutine. Arm weapons for close and semi close combat>*

*– stasis*

cold silver silence. a chill deceleration and a breath cut mid inhale.

thoughts became endless crystal and the last sight before his eyes dissolved into digital artefact – rushes of technicolor pixels –

Lebenswelt decayed still further. endorphins frozen at the nerve points as an eternal pleasure – repeated over and over, like visible emotions caught between the mirrors of ecstasy.

he wanted to keep this moment forever.

## The Book of the Still

The boom was heard across the city, but most people took no notice. This kind of thing happened in Lebenswelt all the time.

The library tower's exquisitely corrupt stained glass and tiger femur roof exploded as the silver teardrop hit its central transept at roughly three hundred and sixty kilometres per hour. The perfectly mirrored surface of the stasis bubble reflected the myriad of shards and splinters of bone as they burst outwards from the point of impact. Twelve metres down and the floor of the observation gallery simply disintegrated under the force of the collision. Below the viewing gallery was the Library of Closed Books. The bubble pierced the ceiling and speared relentlessly downwards through rows B ( *Booby-trapped bindings*) to C

( *Cryptographic indecipherables*). Neatly splintering the wood of the cases, scattering hundreds of volumes like startled birds. As the bubble passed through the floor of this level it left a carnage of paper and shattered glass raining down from the destroyed ceiling above.

Blasting into the next level, the decelerators began to work against the gravity well of the planet, charging up and producing a violet field of negative gravity between the bubble and the ground.

Heat shock from the neg-grav illuminated the walls of the Still Room with crazy fairground shapes. Grotesque masques of shadows littered the ceiling and the floor as the bubble came to a standstill and the violet field beneath the silver began to power down and cool.

Through the shadows came the sentinels.

At mach one point nine.

*security sweep 12349|||\ znkl29. Sentinels alpha gamma thru servitor plural j*

*< begin > light dome insecure – report series*

*< begin >*

*Transept – wave non functional.*

*Cross beam – wave non functional.*

*Tower structure – compromised.*

< arrive Still Room. One Hostile. Destroy > He stepped out of the stasis bubble into the teeth of a sonic boom as the sentinels bore down on him like hellions.

Seven black, horribly beweaponed titanium darts, each the uncomfortable size of a large dog, were flying down the main corridor towards him. He had Obligatory Spectacular Opening

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no time to admire their sleek design, their fierce faces or beautifully concealed inner workings. He had just enough time to pluck a small rust-coloured bauble from his belt next to the Big Red Button.

*The sentinels did not waver as they completed the length of the corridor at twice the speed of sound. There was an intruder in the Still Room. Usually the intruders ran or tried to hide. This intruder merely stood in front of the Book and brought his hands together in a quick deliberate movement.*

*As if in prayer.*

There was a sharp crack and a cloud of glittering particles burst from between the intruder's hands, billowing forth into the Still Room. The sentinels, realising there might be some kind of danger, attempted to fire their reaction jets and decelerate from mach one point nine to zero in the space of ten metres. To give their manufacturers their due, they almost managed it; skidding sideways on the friction heated air, skins crackling with electricity, the tips of their weapon-pods glowing red hot. But the cloud just expanded over them, engulfing each, leaving a dusting of gold and platinum on their outer skins.

As soon as it settled the dust began to flow into any opening or orifice on the sentinel's shells, pouring into limb joints, sensor arrays, exhaust vents and ocular circuits.

The sentinels began to twist and turn frenetically, trying to dislodge the dust from their innards, desperately dervishing in the air and shaking their bodies.

Two clanged into each other with dull comical thuds, another embedded itself in the wall. Plaster fell around it as it began furiously vibrating.

‘Nanite virus,’ said the intruder.

It was roughly this time that the first of the sentinels began to sneeze; a mechanical whoosh of air from its concealed voice box and a splutter from its reaction pods. Then in turn, like a row of hypochondriacal dominoes, the remaining sentinels also began to sneeze. Small wet atishoos at first, which turned quickly into great barrelling tsunamis.

Behind his visor, the intruder raised an eyebrow. ‘With a sense of humour, I see.’

A sentinel close to the intruder thudded to the floor, wrapping its arms around its body, moaning and keening like a child. An extensor tube fluttered uselessly from its innards and with an echoing roar, it vomited a stream of soot from its grav-crusher.

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The Book of the Still

‘Childish bunch Naniteerz – who else would create a computer virus that caused virtual dysentery – just for a laugh?’

He remembered Globbo’s face as he’d handed over the nanite pellet. There had been a sickly grin around his wet, lipless mouth, and a mirthful gleam in his unaugmented eye. Now he could see that Globbo had been fantasising about the moment when his nanite creations would wreak their satirical havoc on the museum’s sentinels. Globbo, he thought, although a genius where micro engineering was concerned, needed to get out more.

Slap. Slap. Slap.

He looked to the end of the corridor. A phalanx of civilian guards was running towards the Still Room; big, (very big!) energy weapons in their hands.

The intruder turned on his heel and faced the Book.

It rested innocuously on a plinth that itself was a raised dais of ebony. There was a helpful card propped against the leather exterior. THE BOOK OF THE

STILL, it read. Underneath in smaller, shakier script (probably the curator’s) was written, ‘Origin unknown. Priceless. Please do not



touch. If you're close enough to read this, you'll be dead in under a second.'

*Never was one for obeying orders*, he thought as he reached out for the Book.

From above there came a half-hearted buzz. The laser security mechanism was gamely attempting to carry out the function that would have been expected had it not recently been obliterated by a stasis bubble arrowing through it at ninety metres per second. One unphased crimson beam locked on to the back of the intruder's hand. If he had not been wearing gloves, it might have caused him mild sunburn. He smiled and picked up the Book.

The security team was half way up the long corridor. Some of its members were charging their energy weapons. The intruder turned to face them again and smiled behind his visor. It doesn't *do* to be smug in situations like this, he told himself sternly, wiping the smile from his lips and readying himself for departure – but he was *enjoying* himself so.

When the first beam fired, the intruder had been in the Still Room for exactly fifteen seconds.

The intruder thumped the Big Red Button.

*An eighth sentinel entered the Still Room through the jagged tear in the ceiling at mach one point nine. It had escaped the nanite virus by virtue of the fact it had been stationed in the viewing gallery and had followed the progress of the stasis bubble through the light dome and on through the floor. The explosion had at first bewildered it, not expecting anything to be able to compromise the tower without Obligatory Spectacular Opening*

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*having been picked up by the sensor waves. It spent a few moments calculating the speed the object had been travelling to pierce the delicate filigree of motion beams without triggering its warfare routines and then a few more moments repelling the wreckage of stained glass and tiger femur from its reaction pods. It had then powered up and whooshed down through the ruined floor, past the Library and into the Still Room. Here it quickly noted the litter of other sentinels writhing in agony on the floor, the security guards haring down the corridor and the intruder thumping a big red button attached to its stomach. In his band was the one thing the sentinels were programmed to protect above all other considerations.*

## *The Book of the Still.*

*As the glaze of stasis began to form another bubble about the intruder, the last sentinel did the only thing it could do under the circumstances. It forced itself between the intruder and the field.*

The sentinel had come from nowhere. As his hand fell away from the button the field began to form. The pre-programmed burst of neg-grav was building beneath his feet, ready to force him up into Lebenswelt's upper atmosphere.

To conserve power however, the stasis field had been set to its narrowest margins. He had not wanted to be carrying bulky power packs on a fifty click freefall from the edge of space. This had proven, under the present circumstances to be, no point beating around the bush about it, a catastrophic mistake.

The flickering field met with the sentinel, crushing its belly against its armoured spine. The intruder flinched instinctively from the clacking and rotat-ing weapons pods as the splash of confined stasis washed over them.

– stasis

something was wrong. nerve endings without pleasure, adrenalin continued to metabolise and decay. a fissure in reality as half the world around him pixellated and blew away while the other half continued to move towards him at frightening speed.

sharp pain across his body as the stasis field buckled around the sentinel, battered it, crushed it and then finally failed.

stasis –

The inside of his visor flashed brilliant red as the emergency alarms of an aborted stasis fired off around him. The mirrored blur of frozen time fell away 16

## The Book of the Still

and the pain brought him to his knees. The now dead eighth sentinel crashed to the floor like junk. He felt rough hands taking the Book from his grasp as desperate fingers ripped the faceplate from his visor. At least it stopped the blaring alarm.

The Thinkswitch™ nodes were removed viciously from his temples,

leaving blood and torn hair. An energy weapon was forced against the side of his head.

He took a deep breath and tried out one of his most winning smiles, the grey blue of his eyes twinkling in the failing light from the neg-grav motor.

‘Given my position and standing within not only this slice of this galaxy but, I’ve been told, the universe as a whole, this is terribly, terribly embarrassing.’

The Doctor had been in the room for exactly twenty-nine seconds.

Oatmeal and Water

*Rhian Salmond is not the kind of girl who goes out of her way to be arrested.*

*Rhian Salmond is not the kind of girl who goes out of her way to be handcuffed.*

*Rhian Salmond!!! is not the kind of girl who wouldn’t be at all surprised to find herself on a prison transporter.*

*Funny that.*

*Trying to channel positive thoughts is not the easiest of tasks when you’re on your knees in a dubious puddle of foul-smelling liquid, while the obviously-in-need-of-their-one-millionth-prisoner-service hover engines wheeze like lung disease, and you keep bumping into your fellow prisoners at every turn and drop. Trying to channel any kind of coherent thought in the close and humid conditions in the back of the transporter without suddenly succumbing to RHIAN SALMOND IS NOT THIS KIND OF GIRL!*

Rhian looked around at the sweating faces of her fellow prisoners. She wasn’t at all sure that she had or had not just screamed all that, aloud, at the top of her voice. The faces that stared back at her were blank – perhaps she *hadn’t* screamed it aloud – or perhaps they just weren’t interested. Maybe they were having their own crises. Maybe they weren’t *those* kinds of people either.

Her fellow prisoners were predominately male, predominately older than Rhian – most with white hair and lined faces. The few women that were crammed into the dingy space were also older than Rhian. In fact, as she looked around the dim interior of the transporter, she definitely felt quite the young whippersnapper.

*That's better.*

*Do what you're good at. Observe. Quantify. Prove your hypothesis.*

*And my hypothesis is?*

*Well, how about 'Through Observation and Measurement I will prove that I am not going to spend the rest of my life in a stinking prison, that there is a glimmer of hope and that this is not the end of the world.'*

*Just by looking around the back of a prison transporter? Where the smell is enough to make a sewer worker vomit, the air is rapidly turning to methane and the guards are looking for any excuse to poke you with their batons?*

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The Book of the Still

*If you put it like that. . .*

*I do.*

*RHIAN SALMOND IS NOT THIS KIND OF GIRL!*

*One good shout is worth a thousand proved hypotheses. Perhaps I should've listened more to the Qualitative Research lectures at university. Might have made this experience a tad more bearable.*

The faces were all turned towards her – eyes wide.

*Ah, I screamed that one aloud then?*

*Yes.*

The guard poked her with his baton again.

The door of the transporter swung back on rusty hinges. Rhian and the others got to their feet and emerged, blinking, into the process yard. Rhian took in the high black wall topped by razor wire and the tall thin gunnery turrets manned by sleek sentinels. As she moved unsteadily across the dusty ground, trying to stamp the life back into her pins-and-needles feet, the sentinels swung to follow their progress, the sun glinting off the silver of their weapon tubes. One of the sentinels left a turret and swooped above them, the wake from its traverse of the yard ruffling their clothes and hair. The breeze was

most welcome after the stuffy confines of the transporter.

The guards herded the prisoners towards a wire mesh compound, slamming the gates shut behind them. The transporter rose into the air, and as the sentinels watched, hopped over the wall with its engines sounding in need of a chest drain.

Rhian tugged at the handcuffs that pinched her wrists. They were heavy and sported a complicated mechanism. They were also jewel encrusted and made from case-hardened gold. Rhian could just make out the hallmark next to her red, raw skin. Her compatriots were similarly shackled. If she thought about it, the gold wasn't a surprise. Not when you considered the history of Lebenswelt and the deals its governments had made over the years with the Galactinationals. But she still had trouble getting past the idea of handcuffs made of precious metals. It was the same uneasy juxtaposition of form, material, and purpose she had witnessed since her arrival. Lebenswelt was definitely a planet with far too much money and far too much time on its hands.

There was no way that she was going to get the handcuffs to release, and twisting her arms was causing more injury to her already painful wrists. She lowered herself uncomfortably to the ground and managed to draw her legs up to her chest. With a bit of awkward stretching, she could put her arms around her knees and hug herself. Rhian was *also* not the kind of girl who would admit Oatmeal and Water

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to needing a hug – but today she felt hugging was a necessity which had been all too absent from her life since her arrest and fast-track trial.

It had all been somewhat of a blur – and taking stock before now had been a little difficult because new and unpleasant experiences had been stacking up to *be* unpleasantly experienced – leaving her little time to catch her breath, let alone get upset at what had gone before. Of course, her mother would tell her that she'd brought it all on herself. That would be something to look forward to when the Lebenswelt Authorities finally allowed her to make her one hyper-link call back to Sirius-One-Bee. It would be. . .

*Arrested?*

Yes. Do you think. . . ?

Attempted theft. Resisting arrest, travelling on false shore-pass-implants.

Rhian could imagine the exact shade of puce that would be invading her mother's face. She could imagine the sweat appearing on her top lip and her hand reaching for the control that would send out the message that she could attend this week's bridge club.

But that was all to come.

Just the mere thought of having to tell her mother about what had happened felt worse than the actual predicament she was in. She really ought to seek some professional help to see if there was some way of coming to terms with the relationship she had with her mother. Rhian was twenty-five years old.

Mother made Rhian feel nine. An underdeveloped nine – a nine year old who still sucked her thumb and wet the bed. The kind of nine year old who was too shy to make imaginary friends.

Rhian was brought from her pleasantly numb daydream by the arrival of another transport. This one looked newer than the mobile junkyard she had arrived in. It settled neatly on the ground, blowing up billows of dust.

An alarm began screeching and three sentinels swooped down from the turrets to cover the transport. Blue lights started flashing all around, hypnotically in time with the siren. Rhian twisted around the best she could to get a better look at the transporter. She could see the pilot clearly – he was speaking quickly into his throat mike, eyes darting from side to side, fingers nervously twitching in the control sets. Then from the prison block, doors were flung open and two columns of guards ran to meet the transport. The guards took up positions at the back of the transport, weapons drawn, all pointing at the door.

Rhian observed the guards' fingers working at the trigger studs, licking at their lips or settling the stocks of their weapons more firmly into their shoulders.

She couldn't hear them breathing over the coarse siren but she could see their chests heaving. She caught the wave of a synchronised flinch move through the guards as the back of the transporter hissed up. Two guards from inside jumped out, each holding a black strap. As they moved away from the transporter, they dragged something out. It thudded heavily to the ground. The guards, as one, moved their gun barrels to point at it.

Writhing on the ground was a huge black bag. Something inside was obviously alive and was struggling to get out. Two more guards leapt from the transport and joined their comrades holding the straps. At a predetermined signal, they began dragging the bag across the earth. The ring of guards crabbed awkwardly with them, half covering the bag, the others having their sights trained on the skies. The sentinels hovered backwards, eyes scanning in every direction, the blue flashing light bouncing harshly off their hulls.

The creature in the bag seemed to redouble its efforts to escape. Rhian winced as a few well-timed kicks caused the struggling to subside a little. She winced again as another guard put in an extra couple of kicks for good measure.

The creature inside the bag tried to roll itself into a ball to protect itself from the onslaught. Rhian felt an old swell of injustice rising up in her chest. This was the kind of thing that, when she saw it on the cinevid news at University, had her reaching for the dyspepsia pills, the placard paint, and the number for Amnesty Intergalactic.

Now she felt so powerless.

Within a matter of seconds, the bag had been dragged inside the prison, the guards following it in. The doors slammed shut and the sentinels whooshed back to their turrets. The transporter lifted into the air, its back door clanging shut with eerie finality.

Rhian turned from the prison block and hugged herself all the tighter.

*Rhian Salmond is not the kind of girl who sits back and does nothing.*

Rhian felt her eyes swelling, a rough pulsing in her sinuses and a tremble stutter through her bottom lip.

It didn't matter how she tried to disguise it by quantifying the facts.

Even before the first tear trickled down her cheek, Rhian Salmond knew she was crying. . .

The warders came for them at dusk.

All day they had been in the compound, the hot dry sun baking the tops of their heads, burning their skin. Rhian felt the uncomfortable tightness across her shoulders that presaged the start of sunburn. Of course, if she could get Oatmeal and Water

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to the medipac back at the hotel, there would be no pain or peeling skin to look forward to. She shifted her position from one numb buttock to the other, slightly less numb, buttock and leaned heavily back against the fence. Her fellow captives had been added to twice as the day had fallen towards night and now numbered twenty-three. No one was speaking; all seemed lost in their own private worlds of grief and pain. As she surveyed the sweat-slick dirty faces, she could only assume that she must look the same. Dirty, tired and defeated.

Not once during the hot day had anyone arrived to give them water or food.

She had not eaten since morning, when the courthouse Warderbot's filthy food nozzle had squeezed a pale paste into her dented platinum bowl. The paste had been sweet and sour with bits of grit that could have been meat, vegetable or just grit. Rhian cursed herself for not finishing the meal because now the hunger that grumbled in her belly was becoming unbearable. Rhian Salmond was not the kind of girl who went this long without a meal – as her wardrobe back on Sirius-One-Bee could attest.

Rhian decided that, now her buttocks were both equally numb, it would be a good time to have a wander around the compound to get the circulation going. As she got to her feet, the compound floodlights came on, blinding her momentarily and causing a thudding shock behind her eyes. Rhian rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands and waited a few moments for the pain to subside so she could blink-adjust her sight to cope with the harsh white. As the blurry compound settled back into dim focus Rhian heard the gates swinging open and the familiar whirr of the Warderbots as they tracked into the midst of the prisoners.

'Form two lines. No communication. Noncompliance will result in loss of privileges.' The prisoners obeyed without resistance and Rhian found herself at the head of the line, next to an unfeasibly tall and bony white-haired man with a deeply lined face. For a second she



made eye contact with him. It was the first connection she had made with anyone all day.

Suddenly she was going through the *routine*.

Check face. Check eyes. Check hair colour.

She looked for any sign of recognition – any sign that he might know her or she may be familiar to him.

The automatic recognition routine was one she didn't have to think about any more; whenever someone could arguably fit the vague silhouette she held in her memory she would run the routine.

Nothing. No smile of remembrance. His eyes were full of sorrow and after 22

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a moment he turned away, shaking his head. Rhian wanted him to turn back, make the connection again – anything was preferable to this. She would have done anything for his face to light up, his arms to be thrown wide (there were no golden cuffs in this brief fantasy) and put around her.

*Rhian!*

The Warderbots urged the lines forward out of the compound. Rhian jumped back into reality. The lack of food was playing havoc with her emotions. She felt weak and light-headed as she shuffled between the gates and followed the lead Warderbot towards the block. As they approached, the doors opened and the dark recesses of the prison reception point could be seen. The walls were running with glistening damp; she could make out a slippery stone floor and bars.

Lots of bars.

The black bag was hung on the wall to one side of the door as she entered. It was empty now, the studded flaps hanging loose. Clumps of hair were caught in the teeth of its zipper. She could see thick bulbs of congealed blood on the tufted curls of the hair.

‘Name?’

Rhian was at the process counter and a guard flanked by a sentinel was waiting to scribe her details on to a floppyscreen.

‘Rhian Salmond.’

The guard scribed slowly as if he had to concentrate *really* hard to not make a mistake. His lips moved as he formed each letter and his brows furrowed deeply.

This was going to take a very long time.

Inside the prison was hot and humid. The windows, such as they were, were set high in the wall and let in meagre illumination from the floodlights outside.

Rhian’s cuffs had been removed as the processing had been completed. After being forced by the Warderbots to change into prison issue fatigues, figure-hugging glove leather with brocade trimming and sequined prisoner number, she and the others had been herded into a high-ceilinged hall that contained long wooden benches and uncomfortable chairs. Rhian had been grateful for the chairs, however uncomfortable they might have been. Something to sit on other than the hard hot ground was bliss.

They sat in silence. No one seemed to have the energy or the inclination to speak. No one – Rhian included – was going to risk a blast from a Warderbot for the chance to utter a few words.

Oatmeal and Water

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Bowls of grey goo were laid before the prisoners and this time Rhian savoured the grit as if it were the finest steak. Those around her ate hungrily too, scraping at the foodstuff with silver spoons, licking the rims of the bowls with hungry tongues. The goo was not filling but it took the edge off the hunger she felt. When she finished she looked around furtively to see if anyone had left any. She was disappointed to find that no one had. With a desultory finger, she wiped the bottom and the rim of the bowl to get any goo she might have missed.

Rhian shivered and suddenly felt less than human.

The Warderbots were moving again through the rows, picking up the bowls.

At the head of the middle table, the red Warderbot rose up on its thin articulated legs and surveyed the seated prisoners.

‘You will go to your cells. Follow the illuminated arrows. Remain silent.’

The prisoners rose silently and began to file from the hall. Rhian saw arrows on the walls light up and display a number that corresponded to the first three sequinned numbers on the prisoner’s fatigues. There were three exits from the hall; the number that corresponded with Rhian’s led her to the middle door.

Rhian passed into a low corridor that came out on to a large wing. Cells were dotted along each wall, fronted by solid bars.

The smells that emanated from the barred openings made Rhian wrinkle her nose. Lebenswelt may be the kind of place where a pauper could eat from a carved emerald plate, but basic sewerage systems seemed to be beyond them.

There was a paper to be written on Lebenswelt’s *Culture to Services* gap, but Rhian would not be the one to write it. She’d be too busy looking for a decent toilet.

The arrow indicators were becoming specific. The group was being whittled down slowly but surely as signs above each cell matched the sequins on their fatigues. Finally, Rhian came upon a cell that bore her number. She waited patiently by the bars, waiting for them to swing back as they were doing for the other prisoners in her group. She waited.

Nothing.

Inside, the cell was mostly in shadow. As her eyes adjusted from the harsh fluorescent lights of the corridor, she became aware that the cell was already occupied. She checked the number on her chest against the number above the door. They did match – so why the delay? Rhian looked about nervously hoping that some glitch in the system would not be blamed on her and give the Warderbots an excuse to get some practice electrocuting.

Rhian leaned closer to the bars, trying to make out the shadowy figure

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within. She could see thin legs lying awkwardly beneath a crumpled body, a hand hung listlessly between the legs, palm upturned, fingers twitching. And then there was the odour. Unlike the sewer smells of

the other cells, this cell smelt of – of. . . rain. Rain and cold air.

‘Stand back!’

Two guards flanked by Warderbots had appeared beside her. She had not even registered their approach. When she did not immediately comply, she was pulled roughly back and held with an arm up her back by one of the guards.

The Warderbot’s powered tines crackled with anticipation and the remaining guard held up his energy weapon and pointed it into the cell.

The bars slid back into the wall and Rhian was pushed into the cell. She crashed against the cell wall and clattered to the floor. The bars went back into place with a heavy clunk. Rhian watched as the guards and the Warderbots withdrew.

With sudden panic and pit-damp fear Rhian realised she had just been locked into a cell with someone or something that made electrically charged Warderbots and energy weapon toting guards seem more than a little concerned about their safety. The memory of the arrival of the black-bagged prisoner earlier that day came flooding back. With rushing anxiety responses Rhian gathered herself up and slid back along the floor, pushing her spine hard against the bars.

‘Stay back!’ Her voice trembled and it didn’t even convince Rhian of its confidence. What chance would it have of convincing someone who scared Warderbots and had to be transported in a bag?

Amnesty Intergalactic be damned.

The figure in the corner raised its hand and leaned forward out of the shadow that hid its face. Blood was crusted at his temple where hair had been torn out.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ said a voice that was cracked and dry, ‘you’re quite safe.

I’m the Doctor.’

Before All That

‘I think I’m forgetting how to be culture shocked.’ Anji turned her back on the window of the elevator as it clanked its way to the top of the observation platform. The Doctor – not listening, as usual – said

‘Hmm,’ and nodded. Fitz was too far gone to make any kind of response. His eyes glittered with wonder as he stared across the city.

Anji folded her arms across the ‘*Don’t ask me, I’m new hew myself*’ T-shirt she was wearing and sighed. ‘It used to be an event. You know, fetching up on some unknown shore, a whole new world to explore, trees with red leaves and pinky-lemon trunks, people in tin foil clothes trying to sell me turkey pills, *et cetera, et cetera*. Now, it’s just mundane. Another planet? Oh. Sorry, I’m washing my hair.’ She sighed deeply again. ‘This place is such a *dump*.’

The Doctor was listening after all. ‘The weather’s nice.’

Anji looked through the grime-swirled skylight at the dirty clouds. A washed out sun flicked in and out of them as if embarrassed by what it was being asked to shine upon. The sky was purpler than the blue she’d been used to on Earth; the haze was smoggy, polluted. ‘When you say the weather’s nice, what you actually mean is that the weather isn’t trying to kill us with sulphuric acid rain or razor-blade tornadoes.’

‘I’ll settle for anywhere that isn’t trying to kill us,’ Fitz said, ruffling Anji’s hair like a favourite pet. Anji bit her lip. She had resolved not to be riled by Fitz today.

‘And the *chicks*! Well, Lebenswelt is *definitely* a planet to hang out on for a few days. Razor-blade tornadoes or not.’

Oooooo- *K. Fitz will not rile me today. Fitz will not rile me today.* It would mean gritted teeth and a headache, probably, but she just had to keep reminding herself that Fitz was from a different, less enlightened time. A time when it was OK to be an ignorantstupidknuckledraggingsexuallyunconsciousthrowback.

That felt better.

Anji congratulated herself on having reached some sort of internal catharsis without actually having to hurt Fitz’s feelings. Perhaps I could try developing the skill of silently, in my head, cathartically hitting him with a chair too?

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The Doctor bent to her ear and whispered, ‘Your eyes bulge when you think things of that nature.’

A rush of guilt and hot embarrassment grew from her gut and splashed on to her cheeks.

That wasn’t fair! How did he do that? *He had his back to me, for Pete’s sake!*

Just when you think you’re getting a handle on him, just when you’re getting an insight into the man who is destined to traverse eternity dressed like Buffalo Bill, he comes out with something like *that* and left turns your whole bloody frame of reference.

The Doctor whispered in her ear again, ‘Just in case you were wondering, I can see your reflection in the glass.’ He wiped vigorously at the smutted window as if to illustrate his point. ‘I never get a chance to read the odd book, let alone the odd mind. Your eyes are bulging again. Are my ears about to start burning?’

She smiled at him and tried to shake herself clear of the bad mood that had been hovering over her since they had landed on *Lebenswelt* (in the middle of its innovatively named major city Lebenswelt (how long had that taken to think up?) – *Der!* ) some four hours previously. In those four hours, she’d seen all she wanted to see, thank you very much. She put it down to the cloying atmosphere of the place, the smell of decay, and the bustling crowds.

The place was a gothic nightmare. Dingy streets, slimy stone walls, rubbish-strewn pavements and cracked stained glass. Every second roof seemed to have a spire, turret, or belfry – as if the Addams family had become property magnates and had decided to build a town. The kind of town where Nosferatu would feel completely comfortable popping down to the blood bank to make a withdrawal.

To complete the sub-Hammeresque feeling, creatures like obscene red bats flapped between the spires and belfries, fighting each other in midair. The battles were ferocious, bloody, and swift. Claws glinting in the pale sun, holes ripped easily in the stretched leather of their wings. Every so often one of the creatures would land quivering at Anji’s feet, wide gashes on a heaving furry belly or terrible injuries about the head. Passers-by seemed to be quite adept at putting the bats out of their obvious misery. Just a swift stamp and twist of an elegantly attired foot and the job would be done. Anji had to keep looking away queasily.

Crowds flocked the streets, growing in number as they approached the centre of the city. The women wore frayed ball gowns; the men big white shirts. At first Anji thought they had landed in the galaxy's biggest Scarlet Pimpernel Before All That

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Appreciation Society convention, until the Doctor explained that it wasn't fancy dress.

'But it's mid morning, they all look like they're coming home wasted after a party.'

'They probably are.'

'All of them?'

'Mostly. The ones that are still conscious.'

'But who does stuff? Who runs the service industries? What's the system of exchange?'

'They don't care.' The Doctor stopped in the middle of the crowd and consulted a helpful printout that had spewed from the TARDIS console just as they were landing and then looked up at the untidy flocks of bats that circled high above. 'Lebenswelt's considerable mineral wealth was sold to a Galactinational five hundred or so years ago. It's now the slice's largest supplier of *thisonium* or *thatatron*, the TARDIS can't remember which, and everyone's fabulously wealthy. The imperative is decadence.'

'My kind of town,' grinned Fitz, who, until this point, had been lagging behind, affecting what Anji had come to know as *The Slouch* – traipsing, head down, with hands thrust deep into the pockets of his jeans. However, Fitz became much more animated as the Doctor read from the guide. He circled the Doctor and Anji, eyeing the natives with a wicked twist to his mouth that showed far too many teeth.

'A planet where the party never stops. I was born to land here.'

The Doctor led them on through the gloom created by the high walls and narrow streets. Anji soon concluded that planning permission was an unheard-of concept on Lebenswelt; the buildings were higgledy-piggledy, seemingly thrown up rather than built. Most buildings had obvious and anachronistic additions grafted on in differing materials without concession to taste or architectural niceties. Stone gave way

to plastic. Wood and stained glass morphed into pebble dashing. However, amongst the scattergun of lurid add-ons there were uncomfortably decadent details – gutters etched with silver filigree, door-mats spun with gold thread, windows inlaid with precious stones. Normally Anji would have balked at such ostentation. However, in the bleak, decayed city of Lebenswelt, the jewels acquired a sour lustre and Anji's sensibilities were more repulsed than insulted.

Before she could continue her analysis Anji had to sidestep a rat that scurried down the centre of the street following a trail of effluent leaking from a cracked sewage pipe. Anji boggled to see that the rat had a gold brocade bow around 28

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its neck.

The Doctor leapt nimbly across the spreading pool of filth and continued along the cobbled street. 'Unfortunately, in a society where no one has to actually fix drains for a living, drains seldom get fixed.'

The narrow streets opened out into a wider piazza, reminding Anji of Covent Garden after a refuse collectors' strike. Piles of detritus lay in sweating strag-gles along pavements, rats dancing over the surface and burrowing into rancid depths. The refuse seemed to be mainly organic, but sparkling amongst the rotting fruit and vegetable matter Anji picked out strings of pearls, golden rings nestling next to the keypads and screens of high-end technological artefacts.

The Doctor stopped once again. Anji seriously got the impression that his mouth and legs had trouble working at the same time. 'You can tell a lot about a civilisation by the items which it decides to throw away, I imagine.' The Doctor gingerly rooted around in a nearby pile of blackening refuse with his toe. He flicked his foot up quickly and then reached out a bony arm, plucking something out of midair. He swung it close to Anji and once she could focus her eyes, she saw that he was holding a jewel-studded bracelet. Muck and grime were embedded between the gems in glistening braids of decay. 'Want it?' He asked.

'No thanks!' Anji took a step back.

The Doctor took a ludicrously spotted handkerchief from a pocket and wiped the bracelet clean between his long fingers. 'Of course there's a small presence of off-worlders who come to leech off the fabulously



wealthy. They run a few bars and restaurants; maintain the hover limos, buttle. But who'd travel this far up the arm to clear up this mess?'

'You could come here and just live off the rubbish,' said Fitz.

Consulting the TARDIS's guide the Doctor's face fell. 'Apparently you can't.

They shoot you on sight for that.' He hurriedly threw the bracelet back into the garbage and, looking furtively around for any watching law enforcement, ushered them on.

As they turned a corner off the piazza, they saw the observation platform scratching an iron-black finger against the sky.

Fitz had been all for going to the top of the structure and had urged his two companions into the elevator at the base of the dizzyingly thin tower. Straining her neck to see the tiny platform two hundred or so metres above Anji had begun to have second, third and possibly tenth thoughts. The Doctor placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'it's been built to *look* unstable. It's a conceit to give you more of a thrill than just admiring the view.

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Think of it as a roller coaster – without the rolling or, er, the coasting.' His voice trailed off as the elevator began to rise.

Did a shadow of doubt pass across his face?

'What's the matter?' Anji asked.

The Doctor shook his head. 'Unfortunate analogy, I think. I've never felt terribly safe on rollercoasters.'

Anji giggled and was comforted by his unease. She felt closer to him at times like this, when he was open about his vulnerabilities – rather than when he was swinging one-handed across fiery lakes in save-the-distressed-damsel mode.

The elevator squealed to an un-oiled halt and the doors made a valiant attempt to open. When it became apparent that the ancient mechanism was stuck rather than just another conceit to discomfit the

passengers, the Doctor and Fitz prised the protesting doors back and they stepped out on to the deserted platform.

‘So doesn’t this *shock* your *culture* Anj?’ Fitz strode straight to the edge of the platform and hung himself against the thin railings like a rag. Anji approached the edge with more care. The wind was brisk, riffing her hair and flapping at the material of her T-shirt. The city lay beneath them like the bubbling surface of an unpleasant stew – all sluggish brown, dirty gold and glistening sepia.

She shook her head. ‘Nope. Like I said, I’d rather be washing my hair.’ If Anji squinted hard, she could make out the milling crowds, the odd hovercar, and far in the distance a silver sea – a blast of freshness after the stink of the city Lebenswelt certainly wasn’t her idea of an interesting galactic locale, more the sort of place that made you want to wipe your feet as you were leaving.

Bats hung below them in crazy flocks, fighting, killing, their battles silent.

But Anji didn’t have to overwork her imagination to dub on the weird shrieks of their clawing frenzies, or the particular sound of ripping wing – a fast puncture popping through dry paper. She hugged herself against the wind and eyed Fitz, who was getting all toothy again. He pointed down at the milling crowds. ‘I must visit the big white shirt section in the TARDIS wardrobe. I’m starting to feel decidedly unfashionable in me denims.’

‘I never really pictured you as Byronic,’ said Anji with the hint of a sarcastic smile.

The Doctor appeared suddenly between them at the rail, hair twirling in the wind. ‘I agree, he’d have to flesh himself out considerably to even *begin* to pass as Steve Austin.’

Anji placed her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggles as Fitz shot her an angry look. ‘Have I just been insulted?’ he asked the Doctor pointedly.

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The Doctor grinned and shook his head. ‘A little bit of leg pulling, that’s all.’

‘Well it would help if I knew which leg was being pulled. That’s the problem with being insulted by a time traveller; you never know where they’re coming from. Or where they’ve been.’ Fitz turned his attention back to the city. ‘I want to stay here for a while, Doctor; research the place a bit. I think we could learn a lot from this society.’

I know exactly what he wants to learn, Anji thought. The idea of staying on Lebenswelt was not an enticing one. ‘There must be a zillion more interesting places to go.’

Fitz shook his head. ‘The next time we step out of the TARDIS could be straight into the pots of King Cannibal of the Cannibal People’s Sunday roast. I say we’ve lucked out here, four hours and nobody’s stuck so much as a pointed finger in our direction. That’s got to be some sort of record. I vote for sticking around.’

Obviously the Doctor was feeling sorry for joshing Fitz earlier, because Anji was galled to hear him say next, ‘I don’t think there should be a problem with staying for a little while at least, as long as we don’t draw attention to ourselves.’

Fitz punched the air. ‘Yes! Time for a big shirt.’

Anji burrowed her eyes into the back of the Doctor’s head. The Doctor, however, was oblivious. He was looking down at the TARDIS’s guide again. A complicated looking street map had captured his attentions. He held the map up, rotated it and compared it to the city below. ‘Yes, we’re here. . . ’ He carefully placed his thumb near the centre of the map. Anji stopped bulging her eyes and moved round to see what was interesting him so.

‘And. . . *Das Museum der Verriegelungen* is down there.’ Anji ducked under his out-thrust arm and saw that he was pointing to a high, turreted building, rising from a set of dark, formal gardens. A huge stained glass dome topped the tall central turret. She thought she could see floating shapes and figures moving within it like fish in an aquarium, but couldn’t be sure through the wheeling bats.

‘Come again?’

The Doctor translated for Anji and Fitz. ‘The Museum of Locks.’

‘What’s so great about that?’ offered Fitz a little too petulantly for the Doctor, whose face fell a couple of notches. Fitz saw this and tried to cap it with a joke.

‘Where’s the Museum of Vodka Mixers?’

The Doctor looked back to the map. ‘I don’t know what’s so great about it either, but the TARDIS has seen fit to double underline *Das Museum der Ver-Before All That*

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*riegelungen* in red and draw little sparkly clouds around it.’ As if to prove what he was saying, he showed Anji and Fitz the section of the map that held the museum and indeed, it seemed the TARDIS guide had marked it out for special interest. ‘You like museums, don’t you Anji?’ The Doctor asked, eyes wide and expectant. ‘We could have a look while Fitz goes back to the TARDIS for clothes.’

Anji nodded. How much of a *sucker* am I today, children?

The Doctor smiled broadly and stared down intently on *Das Museum der Verriegelungen*.

Then he fainted.

The Doctor fell forward on to the railing, pitching head first over the top of it with lolling head and flapping arms. Fitz and Anji leapt for his shoulders.

Anji missed and got a handful of hair. Fitz managed to hook on to the collar of the Doctor’s jacket and they both yanked back with all their strength. The Doctor’s slight frame swung easily backwards away from the drop. Anji and Fitz suddenly found themselves falling backwards on to the cold iron platform.

Anji pulled her hand from the Doctor’s head and saw she still had thick tufts of his hair between her fingers. Fitz rolled from beneath the Doctor’s body and got on to his knees. He bent forward, putting his ear on the Doctor’s chest.

Anji slithered out from beneath the Doctor’s right arm and leg, gently resting his head on the floor. Fitz was moving his ear from one side of the Doctor’s chest to the other, desperately trying to get a fix on a heartbeat. Anji locked her vision on the Doctor’s ashen face. His eyes had rolled back into their sockets, only the whiteness of the cornea showing. His lips trembled with a half-formed word and a dribble of saliva glistened at one corner of his mouth.

As the Doctor’s face continued to drain of colour, his lips became

redder, like poppies resting on snow. Fitz raised his head. 'He's breathing and has a pulse, at least.'

'What happened?'

Fitz shook his head. 'Don't know. One minute he was looking at that museum and then wham! Trying to take flying lessons.'

The Doctor's body was wracked by a contortion. His spine arched; for a moment, only the base of his skull and his heels were in contact with the platform.

Anji had seen something like this before. She remembered a school assembly when Brian Curran had suddenly, pitched forward from his chair and cracked his head like a gunshot against the wooden floor. The teachers had pushed the crowds of children back and stayed with the boy, dabbing at the blood on his forehead, until the convulsions stopped and they could place him in the 32

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recovery position. 'It's an epileptic fit.'

Fitz ran his fingers through his hair. 'Shouldn't we be trying to stop him swallowing his tongue?'

Anji pulled back Fitz's hand as he reached for the Doctor's mouth, remembering the rudiments of a first aid course she'd taken a million years ago. 'No, you don't do that any more. We just wait until the fit stops and then lay him on his side.'

Fitz's eyes were suddenly filled with anguish. 'We can't just leave him like this; we should try and get him back to the TARDIS.'

'TAR. . . ' The Doctor's body went slack and a rush of breath left his lungs,

'. . . DIS'. He groaned and tried to sit up, but failed. His head flopped back on to the platform with a thud. At this, his eyes sprang open and he shot up into a sitting position, rubbing furiously at the back of his skull. 'Well, that appeared to knock the sense back into me. How long was I out?'

Anji and Fitz had fallen back incredulously on to their haunches, and neither seemed able to speak for a moment, until Anji found her voice hiding somewhere at the back of her throat. 'About thirty seconds.

You were having some kind of fit.'

'I was not. I assure you.' The Doctor jumped to his feet and began flexing the muscles of his arms and legs, bending like a velvet-covered frog. 'I was suddenly overcome by a . . . ' He searched for the exact word. ' . . . presence.' He thought for a moment and then fixed Anji with an intense stare. 'I don't think it's a good idea for you to come with me to the museum just yet. Go back to the TARDIS with Fitz and help him choose a shirt.'

With that, he was tripping off to the elevator without a second glance. By the time Fitz and Anji had managed to gather their protestations into coherent sentences, the Doctor was already clanking his way down the tower. Fitz was beside himself as he yelled down the shaft at the rapidly diminishing cage.

'We'll come and find you!'

'Highly unlikely.' The Doctor's voice drifted up without malice. 'I've got the map!'

Visiting Times

*Four hours I could have coped with. Four hours, maybe five, before my skin started to crawl. But a week?*

Anji waited impatiently at the gates of the prison. She was about nine-millionth in the queue of visitors. No, make that ten-millionth. The gaggle of static people ahead of her were shuffling towards the reception point at a pace that would have caused the Himalayan tectonic shunting of India into Asia to shout back at these slow coaches to *bloodywellhurrythebuggerup!* Anji felt like she had been in the queue since she had been born, had grown up in it, and was now entering her awkward adolescent years. It was time to start getting seriously teenaged on the queue.

Anji huffed, puffed and tutted. She considered feigning illness – or at least coughing wetly over the necks of the people in front of her – to see if that would make them move out of the way. She thought about phoning a bomb threat or just marching up to the head of the queue, muscling her way in, and thumping anyone who so much as postulated a negative response to her actions.

But she didn't.

God, sometimes I'm just so bloody *English!*

She didn't believe that queuing was in her genes per se, it was just that it was a social and cultural norm that had inveigled itself *between* her genes and sat there grimacing its pinched schoolmarm face and wagging its bony schoolmarm finger at her whenever necessity began to think about outweighing restraint.

So, she waited in the queue.

Tutting.

Tutting was OK because the English had invented it.

She had been in the queue for nearly an hour now and had had far too much time to reflect on her latest predicament. Time enough to get seriously foot-stampingly angry. If only they'd listened to her up on the observation platform. If they'd listened to her then they could have just had the four hours on Lebenswelt, with its frightening, disgusting city. By now they could have been so far away that she might have been able to clear her mind of its cloying memory.

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However, she'd now been here a week, living in shabby luxury, in a gothic nightmare hotel paid for by a credit chip Fitz had acquired for her from the TARDIS vault. The chip did not seem to have an upper credit limit and the guy who ran the hotel had looked suitably impressed when Fitz had handed it over.

A week!

A week of fighting bats, wearing big shirts and being kept awake all night by parties. Parties that seemed to stretch across the city from horizon to horizon.

Anji had tried joining Fitz at a couple of them, but couldn't get involved. The alcohol was bitter and dry. The food looked lavish but was curiously tasteless.

Like trying to eat a fantastic painting of a beautiful meal. Looks great. Tastes rubbish.

Fitz of course had thrown himself whole-heartedly into the *Lebenswelt*

Vibe as he so annoyingly described it.

Vibe?

Oh, come on!

Fitz said things like ‘cool’ and ‘vibe’ and ‘man’ with the happy abandon of your uncle trying to review a Muse gig. And watching Fitz dance at the parties was almost as embarrassing as the same uncle getting down and dirty to the latest ‘groovy’ sound at a mate’s wedding – all flares, chest and medallion.

Anji believed that Fitz had a serious image problem but because she was so *bloodyenglishsometimes*, she couldn’t bring herself to tell him about it. When he said ‘Right on baby’, she just nodded sagely, bit her lip, and laughed herself senseless inside.

She was also incandescently angry with Fitz for his totally blasé attitude to the Doctor’s imprisonment and twenty-year sentence. Anji’s heart had sunk through the floor as the justice machine had made its pronouncement and the struggling Doctor was dragged towards the cells protesting at the marsupial nature of the trial, the incompleteness of the evidence and the fact that he had not been allowed to offer up any arguments in his defence. It seemed that the security systems at *Das Museum der Verriegelungen* not only had full three sixty degree holovid footage of his audacious heist attempt, but fingerprints, full DNA coding and a signed statement from a creep called Globbo claiming the Doctor had forced him to make the nanite virus on pain of death. As foregone conclusions went, this one was pretty compelling. What hadn’t helped had been the Doctor’s desperate bid to escape the courtroom, which had consisted of certain karate-like moves on the guards accompanied by cringemakingly embarrassing *Hais* and *Hyahs*. The Doctor, to his credit, had almost made it up to the public gallery where Anji and Fitz were holding out their hands to make Visiting Times

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a grab for him. Unfortunately a waist-high robot painted bright crimson and waiting in front of the justice machine had risen up on thin legs like *The Mo-torised Car Aerial of the Law*, and caught the Doctor around the waist. The Doctor’s surprised face and flailing arms had been catapulted backwards out of Anji and Fitz’s despairing grasps and within seconds the Doctor had been zipped into a shiny black body bag and dragged out of the courtroom by a pair of meaty



guards.

It had taken Anji several hours to find out that the Doctor was still alive and that he was being transferred to the main prison on the outskirts of the city.

She would be able to visit him in seven days once he had been fully processed.

A week!

Fitz shrugged and walked from the courtroom. Anji ran up behind him, demanding to know why he didn't seem to be *at all* worried.

'Relax babe.'

She kicked him in the shin.

'Ow! What did you do that for?'

'Relaxation.'

Fitz had taken a step back and knelt down to rub at his leg.

'I'm not worried because he's the Doctor! No sweat. He'll be out within twelve hours!'

One hundred and forty hours later, Anji waited to visit the Doctor in prison.

Anji tutted and then tried out an extra loud sigh.

Fitz didn't think he would ever get tired of wearing big white shirts.

As he walked through the old town, dodging bat corpses and sprays of rubbish fanning out of doorways, Fitz found himself enjoying once again his reflection in nearby windows. The arms of the shirt billowed heroically and he fancied himself as a Cavalier horseman, dismounted for the onerous task of duffing up a few killjoy Roundheads. He'd searched the TARDIS wardrobe for a big floppy Cavalier hat, but Anji's stifled laugh and lip-biting routine had convinced him that perhaps he wasn't able to carry it off as well as he would have liked.

What was it with the girl? She was obviously from a future where cool meant something cold. Yeah, she could carry off the old T-shirt and jeans thing, but when it came to style, she was definitely a couple of Tajs short of a Mahal.

Fitz was glad that he'd kept those sorts of observations to himself. The bruise was only just going down on his shin and sometimes he suspected Anji's sense of humour had rejected her body. *I mean, how could you not love Lebenswelt?*

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## The Book of the Still

OK, Lebenswelt had locked up their only ticket out of here for the next twenty years and left them stranded so far from home that the people around here had never even heard of Earth, but at least there were no wars, no shady government agents and no clockwork arseholes who wanted to turn your face into Roman numerals. At least Lebenswelt was safe.

And Anji had spent the week in a flying huff because she thought he didn't care about the Doctor. Ha! How could she say that? To Fitz the Doctor was the *numero uno* responsibility. He would walk on broken glass to the end of the world for the guy!

There was no way that he could break the Doctor out of prison on his own.

What did she want him to do, dig a tunnel single-handedly? There was nothing he could do at this time except try to learn as much about the society of Lebenswelt as he could, so that when the Doctor (as Fitz was sure that he would) escaped, Fitz could give him a full run down and fill in the blanks in the TARDIS's databank.

And if that meant attending a few parties along the way. . .

Fitz consulted the street map he held and matched the road he thought he was on against the street sign. Bang on target. The street he was looking for was at right angles to the one on which he stood. It was a dingy rat run where the eaves of the house on each side seemed to meet high above the cobbles.

Fitz reached into his pocket, pulled out the crumpled digipaper, and scrolled up to the advertisement. He checked the address at the bottom of the classified ad, nodded, and struck out down the gloomy street. .

Anji would thank him, in the long run, for keeping on top of things, checking things out, gathering important intelligence.

*She would.*

And so would the Doctor.

The feeling of certainty this line of argument brought Fitz completely and utterly tricked his mind into forgetting how much he hated job interviews.

After about sixty years in the queue, when Anji's grandchildren were starting to get moody and spend all day in their bedrooms, she finally made it and was allowed, after the necessary transfer of funds, official bribe, unofficial bribe, surreptitious backhander, gratuity and general rape of her credit chip, into the visiting area. The space was tall and gloomy like many of the official buildings she had had the misfortune to enter during her tenure on Lebenswelt. The walls were rough-hewn stone – no attempt had been made by the architects to ensure any uniformity in the stonework; unmortared gaps persisted all the Visiting Times

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way to the vaulted ceiling. Anji felt very small and vulnerable in the room as a Warderbot led her in. If that was the effect the architects had intended then it had got there with a bullet. Even though she knew the ambient temperature to be warm, she felt chilled and subdued.

The Warderbot indicated with its extensor arm a plain wooden chair in front of a dark metallic table. Anji nodded and sat meekly and looked around her as the visitors who had managed to gain entry to the prison before her met with their respective convicts.

At the back of the hall, there was a sudden commotion; heads were turning, and whispered voices increased their chatter. Anji stood to try to get a better view but was quickly forced back into her seat by a nearby Warderbot. As she craned her neck to look towards the back of the hall, she finally could pick out the curly head of the Doctor. He was being led by two Warderbots. Four guards were training their energy weapons on him. The Doctor seemed unconcerned by the disproportionate level of extra security it was deemed necessary he have.

He walked with a beatific smile, nodding occasionally to inmates he recognised.

When he caught sight of Anji his eyes lit up and his mouth split into

the widest of grins. Eventually he arrived at the table and was allowed to sit down. Once the Warderbots had secured his wrists to the table top with thick golden cuffs and his knees to the legs of the chair with thick straps, they retreated to a safe distance. The guards lowered their weapons but, with an uncomfortable realisation, Anji saw they were still trained on the Doctor's midriff.

'You look. . . well.'

The Doctor's smile didn't waver as he whispered through his too-white teeth.

'As well as can be expected under the circumstances. They're not taking any chances with me, that's for sure. Use of the stasis bubble marks me out for special treatment. High-end technologies always make security forces nervous and I scored double for artistic merit.'

The words of the question stuck in Anji's throat and the Doctor obviously, had no trouble in filling the silence with his annoying insightfulness. 'You're angry with me, blame me for messing up and want me to explain why I tried to steal the Book of the Still?'

Anji swallowed and nodded.

The Doctor sighed. 'I don't know. The memories are all too vague. The last really clear thing I can remember is the view from the observation platform and then feeling queasy and blacking out. There are flashes of other images.

An unpleasant character called Globbo from the Rat's Kitchen and being caught rather red-handed in the museum. Not the most auspicious of interactions with 38

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new and interesting cultures.'

'No.'

'How's Fitz?'

*Spotbloodyonagain!* 'He's. . . '

'Not at all worried that I've been locked up and supremely confident that I'll escape soon and we can get away in the TARDIS? I love it when your face does that crumpled up thing.'

Anji self-consciously looked away, eyeing the guards who were still covering the Doctor, but looking just a little more relaxed. She didn't know why she bothered even having conversations with the Doctor, he seemed to know it all anyway. Perhaps he could tell the real news she'd come to impart to him.

'Don't worry about Fitz, he's completely besotted with Lebenswelt – let him enjoy himself for a while. I'll be out of here soon enough.'

The guards stiffened at this. Anji saw them rubbing their trigger studs and looking hard. 'Perhaps you might want to keep your voice down a little?'

The Doctor looked all conspiratorial for a moment and hissed through his teeth. 'You haven't brought me a file in a cake have you?'

Anji smiled and relaxed, shaking her head. The Doctor sat back in his chair and scratched his nose on his shoulder. 'So how did it go with the Licensing Committee then?'

Ah.

Of course as soon as the Doctor had been sentenced to imprisonment, Anji had put her problem-solving head on and had immersed herself in as much of Lebensweltian legal information as she could download to her Hotel Screen.

After only a few hours she had found out about the Licensing Committee and their role in prison reform. As the prisons were so overcrowded, certain prisoners who had been found guilty of non-violent crimes could be released on licence as long as a friend or relative was able and willing to put up the required surety. Anji's heart had risen, thinking that the reserves of cash in the TARDIS would easily meet the requirements – that it would just be a matter of depositing the cash, springing the Doctor and getting the hell off the planet.

The days spent waiting in draughty court buildings while Fitz partied, waiting for a meeting while the Licensing Committee members had procrastinated about meeting her had not dampened her spirits at all. That is until the meeting was actually over and Anji had discovered what the surety would be set at.

'Well, actually, that's the main reason for me coming to see you, actually.'

‘By the sound of your voice I suspect that I might want a file in a cake, yes?’

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Anji nodded imperceptibly. She felt so guilty, but there was no way she could bring herself to offer up what the Lebenswelt Authorities were asking.

‘They don’t want cash, I take it?’

‘No.’

‘What then?’

‘One lung, both my eyes and an earlobe. I’m sorry I just couldn’t. . . ’

‘I know, I know. You’d look lopsided for one thing.’

Fitz was remembering how much he hated job interviews. And this one was turning out to be more unpleasant than most. Perhaps it hadn’t been such a good idea after all. The advertisement had looked so enticing, promising adventure, excitement and huge lumps of dosh to spend in new and hedonistic ways. Full clothing and subsistence allowance included. Ordinarily even those ingredients wouldn’t have got Fitz to think about becoming employed, old habits dying hard and all. But the advertisement had been headed by the magic words – ‘Become Another Person for One Night – *and* get paid for it.’

Fitz had always been the first toddler at the dressing up box and he had never really grown out of the habit. This sounded right up his alley. However, now that he’d been in the dingy building for over an hour, and seeing as it’d been the first job interview he had attended where he had been required to strip and succumb to a rather personal and invasive security search before they would even tell him what the job was about, he had already surpassed second thoughts and was on to his fifth.

The character who ran the operation, Darlow, who moved awkwardly and smelled funny, had welcomed Fitz through to the back room of the shop after the obvious token heavy, introduced as Gimcrack, had finished the search. Fitz had to dress as he walked and that had not been easy, especially with last night’s hangover doing anti-co-ordination things with his limbs. Gimcrack had caught Fitz neatly as

he tripped over his trousers. Fitz felt decidedly uncomfortable with the big man's hands around his naked torso, Gimcrack's leering smile not helping the situation any.

Once through into the back of the dingy shop Fitz had found an unexpectedly clean and technologically advanced room. Fitz nodded appreciatively at the *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* experience and considered changing his name to Napoleon Solo.

The walls were lined with B-movie computers, and the centre of the room held a Hammer Horror couch beside which a chubby sweat-slick guy in a white coat worked. Darlow introduced him as Svadhisthana. Fitz held out his hand 40

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for Svadhisthana to shake, but the hand was left hanging in mid air until Fitz lowered it with embarrassment. Fitz shuffled uneasily from foot to foot and licked nervously at his lips. Svadhisthana made no effort to explain. Darlow came between them and smiled a shark's smile. 'Don't worry, Mr Kreiner, Svad is a little shy. He also doesn't entirely trust the efficacy of our security measures and wouldn't want to leave any analysable DNA on your skin unnecessarily.'

Fitz eyed the looming Gimcrack and imagined that *he* was thinking quite the opposite.

Clearing his throat of its dryness by trying to make it sound like a nonchalant cough Fitz asked, 'So are you going to let me in on the secret? I mean it's all been pretty shady up until now. I take it this isn't a legal operation?'

Darlow smiled again. Scary. 'Depends on your definition of legal, I suppose.

We're an escort agency, if you like. Escort agencies are perfectly legal, aren't they Svad?'

Svadhisthana nodded. 'Perfectly.'

Escort Agency? Now that definitely sounded like something Fitz should be checking out. He once had the TARDIS make him up some business cards with the immortal legend – 'Fitz Kreiner – Freebooter and Gigolo' emblazoned on them in red velvet. He'd never had the chutzpah to use one and had hidden them away for fear of Anji finding them, but now the idea of being some dashing tuxedoed date

for some dame with far too much money seemed like the kind of career move that, even if it was only for one night, might be the direction to take.

Darlow indicated the couch. 'If you'd like to lie down on the couch, I'll tell you everything you need to know.'

Fitz didn't want to look as uncomfortable as he felt about Gimcrack's close-ness. This was a classic case of him following his nose without thinking about the consequences. But what consequences! He was definitely warming to the idea. If he'd listened to Anji he'd be spending his time now moping around about the Doctor's imprisonment. His interest was certainly piqued, and anyway these guys couldn't be all that shady – I mean, how many organised crime gangs advertised their criminal activity in the local free-papers? Gingerly he eased himself on to the couch and lay back. The couch was very comfortable and Darlow leaned over him, face in silhouette as he eclipsed the rather worrying dentist's light set into the ceiling which Fitz had utterly failed to notice as he entered the room.

Dentists. *Ugghh!*

'Now, Mr Kreiner, let me tell you all about fast-chain memory acids.'

A Different Quality to the Rain

*I'm having trouble containing these feelings. There is a logjam of emotion building up behind my heart and pretty soon it's going to burst out of my chest. I can't sit down. I can't stand still. My hands and fingers don't really want to do what I'm telling them to. There's a revolution going on in my body and it's wonderful. How come no one told me it was going to feel like this? Christ, this is essential information, and should be written on the first page of the book of life then footnoted on every other! There's been a conspiracy to keep it from me my whole life. I realise that until this point I have been completely and utterly alone; just one empty shell waiting to be filled by this terrifying, beautiful, uncontrollable ecstatic emotion.*

*This. . . love.*

*There, I said it. Love. Yes. I'm in love, totally, completely, utterly and all the other words that end in ell-why. It's like I've been taken by the scruff of the neck and all the negative, possessive, sarcastic bullshit has been shaken out and I am as clean and as fresh as white linen blowing on the washing line on a spring morning.*

*I'm stripped of the need to backchat, wisecrack, and generally smartarse*



around.

*It's not a sombre seriousness, there is still lightness, beauty, mad smiles, and there is a depth to every thought that I never knew I was capable of.*

*I have a new balance. Did you know that love does that for you? I never would have described myself as someone with poise and grace. But now I can skip along high walls without fear of falling, leap fences and swing loopily around lampposts like a demented dancer without catching my foot on loose paving slabs or turning my ankles or putting my back out. It's like there's a marionette string attached to my head being worked by the great Cupid in the sky that has injected me with the ability to do anything.*

*And all because of her.*

*Where can I start? How can I count the ways? Christ, I'm even quoting Shake-speare. Can you believe that? I'm changed. And it couldn't have come a moment too soon.*

*She. . .*

*She is everything. There is a glow from her skin that has caught the light from this dingy sun and turned it into something vibrant and alive. The light moves* 41

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*off her skin like falling petals, like petals you can catch and hold, keep forever between layers of tissue paper in your attic.*

*To touch her is to feel energy at my fingertips, a tingle that shivers my heart, my body hot with anticipation. Just to be close to her is to feel alive. So alive that I feel I could live forever. Live forever in her eyes. Lost in the pupils – falling parachutes into a warm ocean. I want to dive in, swim in her warmth and lie beached in her hair.*

*She whispers incomprehensibles in my ear and it is like finding the answer to existence. And the answer is so simple. She is the answer and the completeness with which she fills me in every moment we spend together. Just to look away from her is to rest my eyes on the blades of razors. To be out of arm's reach is to be bereft and empty, to become a hollow in the air, a wasted space, a forgotten corner of the universe.*

*And when she walks back in it is an explosion ripping through the very*

*fabric of the world, a carpet bombing of footsteps and the orange expansion of billowing fire in her dress. She rips apart the planet and leaves me: leaves me breathless in her wake. I float behind in ecstasy.*

*We walk the streets in silence. There are no words needed. Lebenswelt has taken on the two-dimensional reality of a map across which we walk quickly and purposefully, paying no heed to boundaries or symbols. We can go anywhere.*

*We are boundless.*

*Sometimes she catches hold of my hand and we run blindly, lights rushing at us, cars swerving out of our way, pedestrians cowering in doorways as we roar past. There is laughter in this madness and we swing ourselves around, our arms and legs carousels, mouths wide, shouting our music to the stars. We are a crazy fairground of shapes and noises. The warm night air moves the doorways of our tents and exposes the dark interiors, where fabulous gypsies wait to tell our fortunes. We howl a ghost train down the spine of the city, shaking the walls and frightening the children. We are hoopla rings rolling through the traffic, catching each other and winning prizes.*

*Later we hide in the shadows, huddled in each other's arms. We become the silence between the seconds, the anticipation of a breath and the moment before a kiss. It is as if we are carved from the same piece of stone, there is no place discernible where you could tell where she ended and I began. We hold each other in that darkness for centuries. Time is meaningless. Clocks become ornaments.*

*In the one long moment, without the need for breath or the necessity of heartbeats, our rocklike stillness felt like the fulcrum point of reality: the point over A Different Quality to the Rain*

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*which the whole reason for being alive hinged. We felt like we were holding up the weight of creation and together we were able to resist.*

*The city was becoming a dream – fuzzy at the edges; we were becoming more and more disconnected, adrift in the night and drunk on each other I would suddenly start, finding that I had been making studies of the contours of her face and had been so distracted by the downy curves of her cheeks that I didn't realise that we had entered the hotel at all. The hotel was happy to continue the dream motif of the past few hours; the ceilings dripped with chandeliers and the bellhops were golden 'bots with faces so shiny you could shave your face in them. Their coats were of the reddest*

velvet and their hats set at the jauntiest of angles. I suddenly found myself wearing one of the hats. She had lifted it from the nearest bellhop and giggled gleefully as she perched it on my head. We tripped stupidly around the plushly carpeted hotel reception; the comical little metal man, stumping around with arms outstretched, imploring us to give him back his hat. Eventually sick from laughing, we landed at the reception desk and handed back the hat to the

'bot.

The receptionist could see we meant no malice; she looked the kind of woman who could spot love and would give it leeway. She smiled as I approached, the whole silly brilliance of romance filling my heart and head. The glorious electricity of it shaking my hands as I reached for the hotel register and picked up the stylus to write.

Dawn broke at that moment, filling the high stained-glass windows with gold and silver.

A scatter of sparkles filling the air around us.

I looked into her upturned face as she appeared at my side, a thousand lozenges of light flickering across her skin and dancing in her eyes.

I smiled and bent to kiss her lips as she softly ran her warm fingertips across my face.

Without looking I scribbled the stylus across the page and signed us into the hotel.

I wrote 'Carmodi Litan & Fitz Kreiner'.

This Never Happened

Fitzgerald hacked down and down with his sabre, sending soldiers flying in all directions. Turning his horse with sharp nudges from his knees and a hard shift of weight from left to right he urged the steed on up the hill into the boiling melee of fighting. From behind, he heard someone shout out his name.

Looking back over his shoulder he smiled a wide smile as he saw Connery slashing his way through the crowd to ride at his side. Glorious, smelly little Connery. Could a General ever have a better Adjutant? Fitzgerald kicked out at an attacker with a straight boot, catching him full in the face, bursting his nose in a spray of red. The attacker fell away with a groan and as Connery made it to his side

Fitzgerald urged his mount on into the battle proper.

In the shadow of the castle walls, Fitzgerald joined his men in fierce conflict.

They had already managed to breach the portcullis and were now fighting a fierce hand-to-hand battle while arrows rained on them from above. Dismounting and sending his horse back to his lines with a meaty slap on its rump; Fitzgerald hacked his way to the relative shelter of the gate house. He took a few seconds to wipe the spray of blood from his cheeks and eyes. He was relieved to find out that it was not his own. Connery, nursing a ragged slice to his cheek, smiled maniacally through the blood. 'You should see the other fellow!'

Fitzgerald's troops were more than holding their own in the savagery, their training and discipline held no equal throughout the land. Fitzgerald's heart was filled with pride at the way his men seemed to know no fear as they threw themselves forward. 'You'd think they would have grown flabby with overconfidence after the months of siege, Connery.'

'Not these fellows, sir. Hungriest bunch of fighters we've had since the Germanic Campaign.'

Fitzgerald clapped Connery on the shoulder. 'Well, let's not let them have all the fun, eh? With me!'

Fitzgerald leapt from the safety of the wall back out into the throng, hacking, slashing, kicking and elbowing at every turn. Two attackers bore down on him, 44

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their swords flashing; one fell to one of his own side's arrows and the other to a well-timed thrust from Fitzgerald to the stomach. The dead soldier fell awkwardly. Unable to take his sabre from the body (it was wedged between the soldier's spine and the wall), Fitzgerald suddenly found himself unarmed.

Another soldier in the ridiculously plumed armour of the defending castle's forces took his opportunity to step across the growing piles of bodies and come within striking distance of Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald reached for the *sgian dubh* he kept in his boot, but his

fingers felt only empty air.

*Dammit.* He must have lost his treasured dagger somewhere on the field of battle. The soldier swept down with his sabre. Fitzgerald ducked easily and rabbit punched his attacker as he rose.

Where was the bloody knife? Fitzgerald scoured the route he had taken to the portcullis. Nothing.

The soldier came at him again, thrusting this way and that. Fitzgerald sidestepped and caught the soldier's arm underneath his own and aimed a heavy punch into his attacker's face. The soldier fell back.

Fitzgerald was down on his hands and knees now, searching under a couple of the bodies he had just recently dispatched, rolling them out of the way and clawing at the damp earth underneath.

Nothing.

The soldier, now missing two front teeth, came at him again. 'Don't you ever learn from your mistakes?' yelled Fitzgerald, bending to his knees as the soldier rushed forward, catching his flailing tabard in his hands and then pitching him head first into the moat. The soldier fell with a strangled scream and made a satisfying splash. As Fitzgerald got back to his feet, Connery appeared before him holding the knife. 'Are you looking for this, sir?'

Fitzgerald sighed and took the devilish knife from Connery's outstretched palm. 'Connery, how would I cope without you?'

Connery placed his boot on the dead soldier's spine and easily withdrew Fitzgerald's trapped sword from the body. 'Brilliantly I suspect, sir, but I'm sure the armoury tithe would have to be doubled!'

Connery tossed the sword back to Fitzgerald, who caught it easily by the pommel and described two fierce slashes in the air, taking two charging soldiers down without effort. Connery threw his head back with a roar and a smile and then jumped back into the battle.

Fitzgerald, heart pounding, gave forth his own hot-blooded shriek and rushed forward to join him.

‘It’s a bit Boy’s Own.’

‘He’s a boy.’

‘Can’t you tone it down Just a tad? He’ll have no strength left for. . . ah. . .  
,

‘Spoilsport.’

Under the white flag of truce, Fitzgerald and Connery approached the imposing facade of the Vampire Embassy. The bell-pull was a huge golden rope and they both had to haul hard on it to make it ring. The door began to creak op-

‘No Vampires either.’

‘All right!’

‘Temper temper.’

Under the white flag of truce, Fitzgerald and Connery approached *Das Schlo’s Des Arztes*, the foul wind blowing its chill rain at them in stinging bursts. The portcullis clanked up into the gate tower where, backlit and beautiful, Anjilina stood impassively blocking their way, rapier drawn.

Connery leered at the exposed skin at the crest of Anjilina’s dress, the smooth dark flesh dappled with raindrops. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘How unfortunate I do not have my eyes in my chest. Perhaps then we could converse whilst at the same time making eye contact.’

Connery frowned and then growled.

Fitzgerald doffed his feathered cap and bowed. ‘Forgive my adjutant Lady Anjilina; it is many months since he has looked upon such beauty as yours. The Germanic campaign has. . .’

Anjilina waved her black-gloved hand with contempt and snorted. ‘Flattery will get you nowhere, General Fitzgerald. May I inquire why you have approached the *Schlo’s* under a flag of truce? It us not we who are the aggressors.

It is your army that lays siege to *us*. If you want peace you can order your army to march on; we will not resist your retreat.’

Fitzgerald smiled thinly. 'You may not wish a war My Lady, but you have provoked one – as you well understand. I would speak directly with the Duke.'

'The Duke is not able to meet with you at this time. He is busy with preparations for the wedding.'

Fitzgerald bristled and gripped tightly on to the pommel of his sheathed sword. 'My Lady, perhaps you would be so kind as to pass my condolences on to the Duke's family.'

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'Condolences?'

'If the wedding takes place then you will be the only one left alive in this castle to tell the tale. Good evening.'

Fitzgerald turned on his heel. Connery took one last leering look, winked, licked his lips and then followed his master back across the drawbridge.

'Better?'

'More style, I'll give you that.'

The great hall teemed with guests. It was if the siege was not happening, was part of another world.

*'Hang on – you've changed POV! Fitzgerald's not even in the room!'*

*'I know what I'm doing. I'm adding background colour. He'll love it. Why can't you leave this to the expert?'*

*'I have trust issues.'*

The chequerboard-patterned floor was almost invisible beneath the throng. At the chapel recesses set into the far end of the hall, beneath a huge stained glass window, the Archbishop was making the last of many alterations to his address.

Since the two-month siege had begun some time after the wedding had been announced, most of the guests had already made the trek through the high mountain passes. They weren't going to let the small matter of a siege stop them from enjoying the occasion. Well, that's

what the Duke had told them, and seeing as there were none brave enough among their number to argue with him, they were all dressed in their finery and in the great hall in good time for the ceremony to begin.

The minstrels in the gallery struck up their first tune at the signal from the Lady Anjilina, who had appeared dressed in crimson feathers below them. She stalked through the crowd of guests and they parted like the Red Sea before Moses as her sinister-eyed glance cut a swathe before her.

She arrived at the chapel recess and ascended the stairs where the Archbishop, still concentrating hard on his manuscript, seemed not to notice her arrival.

Anjilina waited.

A deathly hush settled over the crowd and the minstrels ground nervously to a halt.

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Anjilina threw a savage glance at the minstrels and they started playing again in double quick time. This seemed to raise the Archbishop from his concentrated state. 'La-la-lady Anjilina. I did not see you. . . '

'Evidently. The Duke is ready to begin. Where is the bride? Why is she not here yet?'

The Archbishop paled visibly and circled his dry tongue around his even drier lips. In all his haste to make the last minute alterations to his address, he had neglected to give the order to his retinue to bring up the woman from the dungeon.

'At once my lady.' He turned, tripped over his cassock, dislodged his mitre, and stumbled down on to all fours. Crawling to the rear of the chapel recess, he ordered the knees of his chief of staff to fetch the bride. The knees replied in the affirmative and dashed off to the dungeons.

The Archbishop regained his feet, if not his composure, and looked contritely towards Anjilina. 'A thousand apologies, my lady.'



‘One for each lash from my Cat o’ Nine.’

‘My Lady, I. . . ’

‘Be quiet, you oaf. The Duke is here.’

The heads of the guests turned as one as the minstrels were suddenly forced to compete with a harsh fanfare from down below. The doors to the great hall had swung open and the Duke Doctori stalked through them. The opulence of his wedding finery drew gasps even from the fabulously attired guests.

*‘Prince dumm dumm, ermm, Prince dumm dumm, ermm. Ridicule-is-dum-de-dum-de-dum-dum. Prince dumm dumm, ermm, Prince dumm dumm, ermm.*

*Ridicule-is-’*

*‘Shhh!’*

Duke Doctori nodded with satisfaction at the response from the gathered nobles as he strode through the channel cut by Anjilina. He puffed out his chest where the gold of the medals threw up skittering reflections on to dark duelling scars.

This was to be his crowning moment. A marriage to cement relations between his Dukedom and the forces of the Holy Hierocracy. His betrothed, a woman of faith and spirit, approved by the Papacy and pronounced a virgin.

There was of course the little matter of her unwillingness to join the Duke in matrimony, but her sudden illness and sad death in. . . oh, about eight weeks would leave the mourning Duke still in favour but, more importantly, rid of the harridan woman.

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The Duke paused in the centre of the great hall, at first to drink in more of the admiring glances, but then to realise that his intended was not already at the altar to welcome him. Well, welcome, *in the broadest sense*. She would, of course, be chained and gagged. The pretty, silver chain and the golden-thread woven gag, he conceded, would hopefully not detract from the jollity of the occasion.

Once the marriage was concluded, the Hierocracy's army would pour fire and brimstone down upon the cursed forces under the command of the rapsallion General Fitzgerald. Doctori hoped he would have the pleasure of removing the cur's head from his body with a suitable blunt and rusty instrument. A good few hacks would be needed –

Doctori wiped quickly at the tear of drool that had appeared at the corner of his mouth and returned himself to the matter in hand. Where was his wife-to-be?

The Archbishop looked terrified and Anjilina was nervously fingering the feathers of her dress. Doctori bounded up on to the altar, his brown curls floating behind him like a frothy train. His grey-blue eyes flashed their annoyance.

'Where is she?' he hissed at Anjilina.

'She will be here presently. The Archbishop has sent one of his retinue to fetch her.'

Doctori turned to the assembled guests, smiled widely, and threw his arms wide. 'Has it not always been the woman's prerogative to be late?' There was an appreciative ripple of laughter through the crowd. Doctori continued smiling, but whispered, 'Archbishop you have made a grave and potentially fatal error.

Judging by the fates of many of your predecessors, this omission was not the best course of action.'

Through the smile, the threat seemed to be all the more forceful and the Archbishop dropped to his knees. 'But, your grace, it was an oversight. . . '

'An oversight? Archbishop, I suspect that if I were to remove your eyes, oversights would no longer be a problem. . . ?'

Doctori pulled a thin-bladed dagger from the scabbard attached with silk to his hip. A gasp of horror ran through the assembled crowd.

*'This is you, isn't it?'*

*'I go away for five minutes and suddenly. . . '*

*'People understand love scenes far better than they understand love, and action scenes far better than they understand taking action.'*

*'You sound like an Armchair Philosopher.'*

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*'Armchair Philosophers are a much maligned species; at least they've found somewhere comfortable to sit down while they ponder universal truths.'*

*'Oh, very good. Very Readerz Dijest. For the last time, show restraint.'*

Another fanfare drowned out the manic minstrels as two elegantly attired footmen wheeled the bride into the great hall. She was tied to a post on a low ebony cart. Her face was covered by a woven golden mask and her body was wrapped in a thin silver chain.

The Duke turned from the kneeling Archbishop and replaced the dagger in its sheath. With a sigh and a choked sob, the Archbishop rose to his feet and thanked God for still having eyes to cry through.

Anjilina used the back of her hand to wipe the tears from the Archbishop's cheeks, whispering in his ear, 'Pull yourself together, you won't get a second chance.'

The Archbishop nodded feverishly and began to smooth the pages of his address while trying desperately to slow his rapid breathing.

Doctori stepped down from the altar and met the ebony cart. He shooed the footmen back and reached up to touch his bride's cloth-wrapped, gagged face.

She flinched at his touch and turned away as best she could. Doctori laughed heartily and placed his hand at her throat, stroking it with undisguised menace.

'Better late than never, my dear. Shall we begin?'

The minstrels struck up the wedding march only to be interrupted again, this time by the furious tolling of the church bell. Doctori shot an apoplectic glance at the Archbishop. 'Not yet, you fool! We're not married!'

The Archbishop looked as though he were about to melt as an aide whispered in his ear. He tried to open his mouth to speak but the words seemed stuck in his throat. In the end he didn't need to speak, as from one of the hall's high windows an archer yelled, 'It's the

alarm! We are attacked!’ As if to underline the fact, the archer was hit by a crossbow bolt and was thrown from the ledge, landing in a crunchy heap at Doctori’s feet.

Doctori closed his eyes, sighed and then drew in a deep breath. He spoke with quiet deliberation, ‘We will finish the ceremony and then we will fight!’

Continue!’

The Archbishop tried to start the ceremony but crossbow bolts began fizzing through the air, scattering the guests. Two bolts embedded themselves in the Archbishop’s lectern. It was all too much for the man – he fainted dead away.

Doctori clapped his hand to his forehead as more bolts splintered the floor near his feet.

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‘Anjilina! The rings! And find me a priest!’

Anjilina tossed Doctori a small leather pouch that clinked as he caught it.

She then moved into the chapel recess and yanked a cowering monk up from behind the altar by his ear.

‘I’m not a priest,’ he whined.

‘You believe in God. You’ll do!’ She pushed him against the lectern and pointed at the scripture. ‘Read!’

Doctori had removed the rings from the bag and had placed one golden band on his own left hand. Pulling the cart forward with his booted heel he dragged the bride’s hand free of the chain and placed the ring on her finger.

At the altar, the monk was stammering and dodging crossbow bolts. Doctori screamed at him to get on with it, so he sped up his delivery, making it even harder to understand. He reached a pause in the text and waited.

‘Is this where we say “I do”?’ Doctori called up to him.

The monk nodded. And he was thankful that he did as a bolt tore through the wooden partition just above his head.

‘We do!’ Doctori shouted and turned triumphantly to the crowd of guests who, to a man, were cowering beneath the banquet-laden tables. Every second or so, a bowl would explode as it was hit, sending a spray of contents up the tapestry-covered wall.

‘We are man and wife! Send a message to the Holy Hierocracy that the alliance is formed and the war can begin!’

His voice trailed off. Why were the two footmen marching towards him with a menacing pace, and why were their swords drawn? Why was there the sound of chains falling to the floor behind him? He turned to see his bride shuffling off the last of the chain and pulling the woven mask from his face.

His.

His?

Fitzgerald laughed as he shook the garland and veil from his hair and leapt from the cart to face Doctori. He held up his hand. ‘Nice ring. Thank you.

Where will we be honeymooning?’

‘I’ve just married. . . you?’ Doctori stepped back and drew his sword. The two footmen were at him quickly. One he recognised now as Fitzgerald’s disgusting adjutant Connery; the smell should have given it away long before this. But the other, it was. . . was. . .

The Countess Carmodi Litan tore off her footman’s wig and threw it at Doctori. As he fended it away with his arm, she thrust forward with her sword.

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‘You don’t object if I kill your husband, do you Fitzgerald?’

‘Of course not, it’ll save me seeking Papal dispensation for a divorce. Be my guest.’

Carmodi thrust again, Doctori countered and thrust back with a steely expression set hard into his face. ‘What a shame Carmodi – if you’d

married me as arranged you would have had almost two months left to enjoy your life, but now, thirty seconds.'

Carmodi leaned into a clinch with Doctori, the swords crossing at their faces.

At first it seemed as though he was going to bear her down on to the floor –

but she brought her knee up hard and fast. Doctori staggered back, clutching his groin. 'Much easier to fight,' observed Carmodi, hacking forward, 'without the constraints of a skirt and bustle.'

Fitzgerald, who was at this moment engaged in a fierce confrontation with the Lady Anjilina, concurred dolefully, hitching his skirts with one hand and trying to hold off the expert swordsmistress with the other.

Connery appeared to be a little left out, having no one to fight on his own, so he started yelling at the guests under the tables to keep still and not move or he'd skewer them like suckling pigs. He also took a quick turn around the hall looking for Doctori's men. They all seemed to have gone to join the battle that he could hear raging outside. Shrugging, Connery ran out through the doors to find someone to fight.

Fitzgerald was beginning to get the hang of fighting in skirts. As long as he kept the flowing white material from snagging between his legs he could move freely. The bustle, however, was another matter and made balancing more difficult, especially now he was fighting Anjilina up and down the lengths of one of the banqueting tables, the guests cowering underneath.

Anjilina was fast and furious and brilliant. Fitzgerald commented favourably on her technique as she came at him again in a flurry of steel and feathers.

She thanked him and redoubled her attack. 'I'm not sure the dress suits *you*, however.'

Fitzgerald dodged sideways on to a chair. Anjilina was unbalanced and sprawled on to her hands and knees in the mess of food and wine. A swan carved from sparkling blue ice shattered around her, depositing chill shards down the back of her dress. Fitzgerald plunged his sword at her exposed back but she turned quickly, parried, and rolled off the table to confront him again.

Carmodi was backed into a corner. Doctori was a fine swordsman and was quick and strong. He lunged again and again; each block Carmodi achieved seemed to urge him on more. The lunges were getting uncomfortably close This Never Happened

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and Carmodi looked as though she was tiring. A month in the castle dungeons had done nothing for her general health.

From the corner of her eye she saw that Fitzgerald was similarly engaged with the foul Anjilina, although he appeared to have the upper hand for the moment, beating her back as showers of ice fell from her hair. Carmodi felt a painful nick on her shoulder and registered with alarm that Doctori's thrusts were indeed starting to find their target. She could not back away any further; the corner of the hall was now cramping her efforts to defend herself. She looked about wildly for someone to come to her aid.

'Need a rest?' Doctori sneered as Carmodi ducked another blow, 'I didn't think this would be how I would be wearing you out on our wedding day!'

Carmodi struck back with equal ferocity and tried to rush past Doctori but he pushed her back with his free hand – a hand that was now drawing its dagger.

'Oh, you'll have to do better than that,' he smiled, taking another step forward and feigning lunges at her face.

Carmodi was running out of options.

Fitzgerald jumped forward, unexpectedly sliding his sword down the length of Anjilina's blade and pushing it to one side. Anjilina was startled as Fitzgerald dropped his own sword and grabbed her wrist in one neat movement. He caught her other wrist as she tried to strike him and spun her easily around, forcing her arms painfully up her back. Holding both her thin wrists in his left hand, he bent her forward and delivered a fast stiff-fingered chop to the back of her neck. She slumped to the floor unconscious. Fitzgerald retrieved his sword and gathered his skirts. As he faced the corner of the hall where he remembered Carmodi had been fighting Doctori, his face became a mask of horror.

Below the huge stained glass window that shone above the Chapel Recess, Doctori held Carmodi still, the point of his sword drawing a

dot of blood from beneath her chin.

Fitzgerald knelt and dragged the unconscious body of Anjilina up by her hair.

He placed his blade at her throat.

Doctori laughed. 'Kill her. See if I care. There are a thousand companions where she came from.'

Fitzgerald sighed bitterly and let Anjilina drop back to the floor with a thud.

She groaned and rolled on to her back. He strode forward to the foot of the altar. Doctori pushed his blade a little harder against Carmodi's neck. 'I think that's far enough, don't you?'

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Fitzgerald threw down his sword. 'Let her go. Take me. I'll fetch a good ransom.'

'But not good enough.'

Carmodi was shivering with fear; tears welled in her eyes as her throat trembled at the point of the sword.

'The Hierocracy has demanded this marriage will go ahead. I *will* have their patronage.'

Fitzgerald's head turned, what was that sound? A buzzing. A whooshing, coming from above. Doctori looked about wildly, trying also to place the sound for himself.

A flood of realisation surged through Fitzgerald and he screamed 'Down!'

throwing himself to the floor as he did so. Distracted for a moment, Doctori let the point of his sword slip from Carmodi's throat. She took the opportunity to dive down the altar steps and huddle close to Fitzgerald as above them the huge stained glass window seemed to bulge like a pregnant belly for a few moments before exploding inwards.

The air around them became a maelstrom of flying glass and lead as



through the centre of the chaos Connery flew in with a large silver jet pack strapped to his –

*‘Jet pack?’*

*‘It works .’*

*‘He’s right, Darlow.’*

*‘What would you know, muscle-head?’*

*‘It’s the best one we’ve had for months. This guy’s imagination is incredible.’*

*‘Under my control, it’s incredible.’*

*‘All right, all right, leave the jet pack in. Come on, finish up, it’s nearly time for breakfast.’*

They flew directly out of the castle, clinging on to Connery’s filthy clothes, unwilling to talk to each other for fear of having to breathe in the noxious odour. Connery set them down a mile from the *Schlo’s* and then returned to give their invading troops the signal to withdraw.

Fitzgerald held the Countess close. He revelled in the feeling of being near to her again.

*‘You came for me,’* she whispered in his ear.

He nodded and kissed her lips gently, relishing the taste after so long. *‘You always knew I would.’*

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She held him tightly, *‘I love you so much.’*

*‘And I you. When we are together the air is made from a beautiful madness.’*

*‘What shall we do now?’*

Fitzgerald paused and smiled, *‘Breathe deeply.’*

*All non-actual situations and retro-actors in the above memories are TM and c to the IntroInductions Agency, 4009.*

*‘Do you have to put that in? It’s terribly embarrassing.’*

## Dream Time Error

‘The institution begins to institutionalise you from the moment you walk through the door. It can be any institution, you understand. The army, hospital, prison. You start to rely on the routines to assuage your anxieties. Even though you loathe the place to the very core, you find it impossible to leave, because the certainties of those routines become ingrained. You lose the power of independent thought. Routine becomes paramount. The only imperative.’

‘So you’re only eating random meals, and random amounts of some meals, as a way of protecting yourself against institutionalisation? Is that it?’

The Doctor smiled, putting the bowl of grey food on to the floor and pushing it away with his toe. ‘No, I genuinely don’t care for the meals, but the principle is sound. I think I shall take my afternoon nap at four a.m. tomorrow morning.

How about you?’

The Doctor crouched on his haunches against the wall of the cell wearing the face of the most earnest man in the universe. Rhian could not be sure if he was trying to confuse her, make her laugh or convince her that he was telling the truth. He was maddeningly obtuse sometimes; would witter on for hours about minutiae or huge philosophical concepts, or could be just as happy with silence.

He still smelled of rain and this was worrying Rhian too. If she closed her eyes sometimes late in the evening, as his odour of rain and dark forests met her nostrils she was sure she could see the jagged lines of lightning bolts flickering on the back of her eyelids.

Maybe they were putting drugs in the food. It hadn’t been an unheard of trick. She distinctly remembered reading something about it in an Amnesty Intergalactic visipamph she’d cannibalised the screen from, when her personal Teev had gone the way of all shoddy electronics. The rest of the dead-eyed visipamph had spent the remainder of the term propping up a wonky leg on her dining table; that’s why the drugs thing stuck in her memory.

‘So why did you try to steal the Book of the Still?’

Rhian’s cheeks reddened as she remembered her less than subtle

attempt to pick the Book from its plinth, the inordinate amount of alarms that screeched, 56

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the explosion of charged light that threw her off her feet into the capture net of the nearest sentinel. Like any good middle-class girl who didn't want to answer an embarrassing question, Rhian changed the subject. 'So, you're a time traveller then.'

The Doctor was somewhat taken aback, not because she'd changed the subject but because he didn't go around telling people he travelled in time willy-nilly. 'How did you know?'

'I didn't – but if you tried to steal the Book then you are either a Finder or a Seeker.'

'A what?'

'From Albrecht's *Of Finders and Seekers – a users guide to being lost in time*.

Sirius One-Bee University Press, 3972. Pretty wide of the mark on the Book's origins, mainly because the Lebensweltians won't let anyone study the Book or its contents; but his interviews with Finders and Seekers on Lebenswelt and his first academic usage of the street slang for them is seminal. Do you know that after a few years or so of being unable to travel in time frequent time travellers experience Albrecht's Ennui? It's named after that paper; where it was first recorded. Time travellers become listless, depressed, cantankerous. . . '

The Doctor coughed. 'I've heard about it in passing. . . '

Rhian opened her mouth to continue and then halted in mid-breath, 'You're not a Finder or a Seeker are you? If you were, you'd know what they were called, and as you're not, then. . . you're not homeostatic are you? I can usually tell but. . . '

'No. I have a blue box.'

'A time machine?' She giggled. 'They've all got time machines!'

The Doctor looked wounded, 'It's a very nice blue box.'

'I'm sure it is. But it's a bit passé in this day and age, don't you think?'

‘I don’t get many complaints.’

‘I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.’

‘You didn’t. . . ’

‘Yes I did, your face fell through the floor.’

The Doctor looked away. Rhian moved across the cell to meet his faraway gaze. ‘Sorry, it’s just that sometimes I get carried away in the moment. I don’t mean to be rude; I’m just not going out of my way to be polite.’

‘That’s a subtle differentiation.’

‘Works for me.’

The Doctor laughed a genuinely happy laugh and Rhian immediately felt a lot better. She sat beside him against the wall and they both stared out 58

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through the bars at the main thoroughfare of the prison wing. Warderbots processed serenely up and down, checking on the inmates of each cell. One paused in their entranceway. It scanned them, a laser recognition beam passing with gentle warmth over their faces. The Doctor whispered to Rhian that the Warderbot was twenty seconds late for this sweep.

‘I wonder if it’s feeling institutional anxiety?’ she whispered back.

The Warderbot moved off and they could see across the corridor again into the adjoining cells.

‘I’m aware that you very neatly changed the subject when I asked you about stealing the Book, and I will be returning to the question at a later date, but perhaps in the meantime you could tell me *about* the Book.’

‘You mean you’re a time traveller and you don’t know about the Book of the Still?’

‘Imagine I’m naive and somewhat out of touch after travelling around in such an outmoded form of transport for so long.’

Rhian felt her cheeks redden again, but pressed on. ‘The Book of the

Still is the safety net. If you're a time traveller and you get separated from your time machine or whatever, you find the Book, write your name in it and get instantly rescued by a time traveller from the future.'

'And Seekers are?'

'Stranded time travellers looking for the Book.'

'Finders being the time travellers who do the rescuing?'

'Yes.'

'What a staggeringly useful artefact.'

'Isn't it.'

'Yes. And strictly speaking,' the Doctor chewed thoughtfully on his thumb for a few moments before continuing, 'it shouldn't exist.'

'They've gone. I took the register and hacked the system. Checked out at oh-five a.m. Forty minutes after checking in. They didn't take a taxi, or if they did the city records have been tampered with.'

Gimcrack tried to finish the sentence as quickly as he could. Perhaps if he got it over and done with in one hit, Darlow wouldn't immediately recognise the utter monumentality of the crisis. When Gimcrack started making up words like monumentality, he knew things were ultrabad.

Darlow sat down heavily and Svadhisthana dripped coffee down his chin on to his white coat.

'Check the drogue again.'

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Svadhisthana shook his head. 'I've checked it twice; it's either been removed or is being shielded in some way. We have no serviceable link to Kreiner any more.'

'Check it again!' Darlow raged to his feet, spinning on his heels and getting right into Svadhisthana's face with serious and threatening speed. Svadhisthana flinched backwards and returned to the machines, his trembling fingers working at the drogue controllers.

Gimcrack held his breath. If Darlow was screaming at Svad it was only a matter of time before –

The punch caught him squarely in the mouth and he rocked on his heels.

In all honesty, he knew that Darlow had hurt his own hand twice as much as he'd hurt Gimcrack's mouth but he made a nice loud 'Ow' sound anyway, and reached up to rub at his lips.

Darlow was shaking his hand in a frenzied attempt to relieve the pain. Gimcrack stepped forward, 'Would you like me rub that better for you Darlow?' he said, pretending that his lip was fattening by slurring his words. Darlow shook his head and joined Svadhisthana at the drogue controller. 'Anything?'

Svadhisthana shook his head. 'No. It's dead. We have some residual images from the memory channels but nothing since oh-five thirteen.'

'Why didn't the alarms trip until four hours later?'

'I don't know. She obviously has access to some nifty technology. A credit chip takes some cracking.'

Gimcrack eyed Darlow nervously as he fingered Carmodi's credit chip, the one she'd used to pay for Kreiner. The funds transfer had been verified by Darlow's account at the central bank. All the security codes had been in full con-cordance. He'd even told Gimcrack what he was going to do with the money, and how many legs she'd have.

The first thing Darlow had done after Gimcrack had woken was check the credit chip and the account. It was if the credits had just been sucked back out again, taking a fair proportion of what had been in the account already.

Svadhisthana had started talking about loop-hacks, circular-transactions, and servitor level codex-eHeist before Darlow had pinned him up against the console and told him to check the drogue.

Of course, there had been no signal – that's what all the alarms were for, even Gimcrack had worked that out, but he kept it to himself. He was paid to be muscle, not to do thinky-things. He was quite happy with that. Except when he had to pretend to be hurt when Darlow hit him; that he did not enjoy.

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He'd always shied away from the role-play exercises in the delinquency-therapy VR's.

There had followed three frantic hours while Gimcrack had been sent out to get the hotel records and to find out where Carmodi and Kreiner had gone after checking out. The trail had been totally cold. Gimcrack knew that if he returned with nothing, his meagre acting skills would be tested to the very limit.

And of course he had been right.

Darlow was taking deep breaths to calm himself. He rubbed at his forehead and paced. 'OK, we have his DNA. Gimcrack, get out there with the sniffer, see if you can't track him down with that. They haven't had time for genome recoding but it might be worth Svadhisthana getting down to the wharf and staking out Child's operation. They might go there before skipping planet.'

'What makes you so sure they're going to skip the planet?'

Darlow stopped pacing, let his hand fall, and then fixed Svadhisthana with a stare that would bore holes through concrete. 'Would you stay wharf-side if you knew I was after you?'

Svadhisthana shook his head slowly.

Darlow tapped Svadhisthana's cheek lightly. 'Go, now.'

Gimcrack hefted the bulky sniffer and followed Svadhisthana out of the room.

'A non-linear anthropologist?'

Rhian was used to the blank stare she got from people when she told them what she did. 'I have a small grant from the University on Sirius One-Bee. Some money willed to me by a great aunt who time-travelled through powered mirrors. We're not sure if she did the 'one-penny in the high interest rate savings account a thousand years ago' trick, but ninety-nine per cent of it was taken in time-tax. Still leaves me enough to get by.'

'And you study time travellers?'

'My PhD is in Homeostatic Time-travelling Cultures and their

relationship to absolute Time.'

'Really?'

'Yes. All that mucking about with time-engines and blue boxes, killing your grandfathers and winning the lottery is of no interest to me. Indigenous cultures, who've slowed their societies to absolute homeostasis, time jumping through the one moment; reverse reincarnation, and Dream Time Errors. That's Dream Time Error

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the bleeding edge now. That's where Albrecht went. In a DTE. He'd spent fourteen years slowing to homeostasis with the aboriginals on Hej. Almost there –

his diaries on the subject are amazing – then wallop! One day while he was getting totally native, he fell between two song-lines, retro-crashed three of his ancestors and was wiped from existence. His diaries only survived because the DTE caused a reality-pocket in which the rescue team could move for about twenty-four hours. A terrible paradox – but luckily he'd time-coded all his later life-decisions and they could easily track the gaps he'd left in his life and plug them with viable alternatives. OK, so I have to admit, time machines do come in useful sometimes.'

'I find pausing for breath helps enormously in maintaining continued consciousness.'

'Oh there I go again. Please hold up your hand if I start to bore you.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, it's fascinating, really. I've been so caught up in the machinery of time travel that I've forgotten all about the emotion of it. The raw thrill of it. Wonderful.'

Rhian felt suffused with a warm glow. She tried not to blush again, but the mere act of trying caused her cheeks to become hot and her eyes to sting. The Doctor was much more animated now. He slid his back up the wall and hopped up on to the top bunk bed, kicking his legs back and forth like an excited child on a swing. 'So the Book has been around for a very long time and it's been established that it exists far into the future, if you look at it relatively from this point in time. Yes?'

Rhian nodded, warming to her subject. 'Yes. All you have to do is track it down. Up until a few years ago, this was the most difficult



part of the operation.

Then it was acquired by the Museum of Locks here on Lebenswelt and put on display.'

'Why would it be acquired for a Museum of Locks?'

'You really have been out of touch, haven't you?'

The Doctor stopped kicking his legs and shrugged. 'I feel like I've been around the block a few times but there are still lots of gaps. Please fill me in. It's ten a.m. now. You've got, oh, just about another nineteen years, eleven months and two weeks to get the story out. I wouldn't want to miss the end by being released, now, would I?'

Rhian grinned. '*Das Museum der Verriegelungen* is a museum of locks and security measures. The *exhibits* are guarding the artefacts. People come from all over to marvel at the security systems. The artefacts are just there to be ironic.'

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'The museum acquired the Book?'

'Lebenswelt is fabulously wealthy. The curator of the museum managed to track down the planetoid where this time's copy of the Book was known to exist, bought the planetoid, and had it shipped back here. The Book was recovered by an unscrupulous time-sensitive and put on display behind the best security system in the galaxy – well that's what it says in the brochure, I wouldn't use the parentheses in dialogue. Half the people in this prison are academics who've tried to steal the Book to study it, another half are stranded time travellers who've tried to steal it so that they can write their names in it, and the other half are time travellers trying to get to the Book and release it back into the time-lines. If the Book is stuck here forever then no one else gets rescued.'

'You do realise that sentence contained three halves?'

'It's a crazy universe, Doctor.'

Now that Darlow was alone he could marshal his thoughts. Once he'd stopped screaming at his thoughts to calm down and get into some sort of order, that is. This was turning out to be a very bad day. Not

only had he lost a *subject*, but he had also lost fifty-three thousand of his most favourite credits.

He felt vulnerable. This was not a feeling which he was used to experienc-ing. The IntroInductions operation had been running very smoothly, thank you very much, amongst the wealthy Lebensweltians. Svadhisthana placed veiled advertisements in only the swankiest visimags, and they were very careful to cover their tracks. Now that Kreiner had been stolen, it could only be a matter of time before Darlow and the others would be processed with maximum prejudice through the justice system.

They were looking at thirty years to life for possession with intent to administer fast-chain memory acids and thirty years to throw-away-the-key for altering memories without a licence. It was time to pack up and move on.

Such a shame, they had mined a deep and lucrative vein – bored rich kids on Lebenswelt – the doe-eyed offspring of the party generation, all seeking a new thrill. Seeking that most elusive of all emotions. Real Love.

Money can't buy you love?

*It could now.*

Darlow sat heavily at the console and loaded up the copy of Kreiner's romp through the castle. What was it about boys and swordfights? Give Darlow a blaster any day of the week. Not exactly noble but a darn sight easier to finish the job out of the range of a pointy bit of metal. The mixture of romance and adventure that Svadhisthana had woven for Kreiner and Carmodi was a heady Dream Time Error

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brew, but Darlow knew that residue images, emotions and characters, the ones which were left to the subjects' own devices ("spontaneously created by the subjects"), could tell you much about the subject.

Anjilina and Doctori were obviously shadows of characters in Kreiner's real life. Kreiner's memories of these people would be altered to fit the adventure, but they were real enough. Checking Kreiner's levels of attachment to these two; the graph flew off the scale for Doctori.

Interesting.

He cycled the memory record right back to the moment when the memory acids had been administered in the chair. As the replay of the loader programme leeching memories from Kreiner's brain ran, Darlow caught a glimpse of the real Doctori striding towards the elevator at the top of the city observation platform. Cross-referencing this memory against the attachment indicator and relationship quotient, Darlow was able to see that Kreiner probably considered Doctori to be his greatest friend. The passion gradient hardly blipped, so the relationship could be described as platonic.

Anjilina, on the other hand – and Darlow heartily concurred with the passion indicator on this one – was an entirely different matter. In her red-feathered crimson dress, Kreiner had found her irresistible; but those feelings had been transformed by Svadhisthana's clever manipulations and skewed towards Carmodi. *Wouldn't have done for the client to miss out on what she'd paid for.*

As Darlow again cycled back through Kreiner's memories to the point where the memory acids had been introduced he was intrigued to see the passion indicator drop almost to the level of Doctori's reading. *Intriguing.* In the real life relationship, Kreiner saw the beautiful Anjilina also as a friend rather than a potential lover. There was either something seriously wrong with Kreiner or his fetish for crimson feathers knew no bounds. *All that sword fighting in a dress.* Hmmm.

Darlow fine-tuned the memory channel again and tried to pick out more detail. There was a tall blue box in an ornamental garden; again the relationship indicators were cresting the top of the scale. This was one seriously weird palooka.

He switched to Carmodi's drogue readings. These were much more sedate.

A coffee house, a dining room, candles and a fair amount of chintz. Girl-stuff.

Darlow snorted.

There was a fuzzy discontinuity that the screens couldn't lock down immediately. Darlow twiddled a few dials and flicked a couple of switches. It had little effect on the picture and the readings on the indicators were all bottoming out.

Darlow went deeper, flipping forward to after the memory-acid introduction.

The girl's memories were still a swirl of incoherences. There was a sickly buzz emanating from the speakers, filling the room. Darlow reduced the volume, but the uncomfortable feeling was one that was not amenable to such changes.

Deep, bass rumbles shook his guts and for a moment had his head spinning.

Darlow cut the replay and sat back in the chair. What the hell was that?

Gingerly he restarted the replay and went through frame by frame in silence.

The memories didn't seem to conform to any set pattern, there was a lot of space travel, a host of worlds he didn't recognise and a red corpulent sun which kept reoccurring and then bang! He was back looking at chintz and candles.

Darlow was confused. It was if the drogue transmissions had jumped track, deflecting deliberately from something that Carmodi had not wanted them to record. The screen filled with flashing light; the picture rolled and slid sideways. He reached out for the controls but with horror found he was held frozen in the flickering blue glow. The sound filled Darlow's body, jagged noises that rattled his intestines and squeezed his stomach with a greasy nausea.

Darlow vomited noisily and slid from the chair.

The blue flickering continued for a moment or two and then the machinery could not cope any more. With a fizz and a sharp crack the screen split in two, showering the unconscious form of Darlow with sparks.

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The exercise yard was an enclosed quadrangle in the depths of the prison buildings. It was surmounted by the same vicious razor wire that topped the outside walls. Three sentinels patrolled the airspace above as the prisoners filed out into the yard. Rhian was shackled rather uncomfortably to the Doctor by the wrists. This was the second time they had let the Doctor out of the cell without the paranoid presence of a dozen energy weapons.

‘The Warderbots must feel a little more comfortable with me,’ he observed, blinking in the harsh light. ‘I suspect all the special treatment I got at the beginning was more about the technology I used to gain entry to the Still Room than my actual ability to escape. Must have put the wind right up them to be bamboozled so efficiently.’

‘You were still caught.’

The Doctor huffed his cheeks out and straightened his back, ‘Not because they were better, but because I was complacent. If I had my time over – a few more powerpacks, a tougher stasis field and Bob’s your uncle.’

The Doctor mimed the whole operation of stealing the Book with a few quick movements of his hands, finishing by almost pulling the much shorter Rhian off the ground by her wrist. He did however dislodge her glasses which, with another quick movement that had them clashing heads painfully, he caught before they could be damaged on the ground. The Doctor perched the spectacles back on Rhian’s stubby nose and rubbed at the bruise developing on her forehead.

‘Sorry.’

Rhian frowned and pushed his hand away, ‘It’s all right, I’ll do it. You’re too clumsy by half, probably poke my eye out.’

‘Clumsiness can be seen as a direct correlation of high intelligence.’

‘Only by the short-sighted.’

The Doctor breathed in the air, expansively filling his chest and pointing his nostrils to the sky. Rhian noticed that the sentinels all seemed to have their weapon pods trained on him. Not taking that much of a chance, she thought.

The line they were in started to turn around the corner of the yard and make its way back to the entrance point. The Doctor was keenly looking about at his 65

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fellow prisoners. Behind them were two elderly prisoners chained similarly at the wrist. Their faces were cast down, mouths chiselled into set frowns. The Doctor called to them brightly, ‘And what are you in for?’

The taller of the two raised his head, white fuzzy hair forming a clown’s hat around his balding pate.

‘Is that the most ridiculous question you’ve ever heard, Taber?’

‘Indubitably, Soolan.’ The other prisoner nodded his head dolefully, but did not raise it to make eye contact with the Doctor.

‘Oh I can be much more ridiculous than that, sir,’ the Doctor smiled. ‘Can’t I, Rhian?’

Rhian nodded. ‘Oh, yes.’

‘Are you Seekers, Finders or academics?’ the Doctor asked Soolan.

‘We forget,’ said Soolan with an aggressive air of finality that the Doctor did not challenge.

The Doctor turned back to Rhian, who was walking ahead now and putting tension on the chain. ‘They don’t seem to be very communicative,’ he said, catching up with her and falling into step.

Rhian nodded. ‘They’ve been stripped of their PhDs by the Academic Court back on Sirius One-Bee. There’s a dim view taken of this kind of activity, getting involved in theft and everything.’

‘Obviously being stripped of your qualifications is not something that you considered before you tried to steal the Book?’

Rhian pursed her lips so tightly that they thinned out to colourless lines. ‘I have my reasons.’

They completed another circuit of the yard before either of them spoke again, the Doctor in thoughtful contemplation and Rhian feeling uncomfortable about the line of questioning that she knew would be coming from him sooner or later.

The Doctor scratched at his nose, inadvertently lifting Rhian’s arm up on the chain as he did so. Well, seemingly inadvertently, because as her arm reached the apex of its lift the Doctor reached across with his other hand and tickled her mercilessly in the armpit. His face lit up with glee as Rhian twisted out of his reach. ‘Thought you needed cheering up, too!’

Rhian’s screech of high-pitched laughter had alerted the attention of a nearby Warderbot; it rolled towards them, fixing them with its metal diaphragm eyes.

The Doctor stood to attention and said, ‘Say “Cheese”, Rhian.’ The Warderbot approached menacingly and extended one of its articulated arms.

The Warderbot exploded.

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Prisoners scattered from the rising fireball. Where the Doctor and Rhian had just been was a something other than a rising pall of black smoke.

Fitz had not returned to the hotel all night. Anji had asked room service to inform her the second he walked through the door. She had several pieces of her mind to give him and really wanted to meet him at the elevator door so that she’d have the entire length of the corridor before he could reach the safety of his room.

Anji’s anger had peaked at around two a.m. but had started to morph into concern as the night rolled interminably towards morning. She’d kept trying his new mobile (the Doctor had explained that they weren’t strictly mobiles in the mobile sense, i.e. no need for top-up

cards and ring tones from the Planet Hell and that the TARDIS would handle all the satellite stuff), but she kept getting the 'The Fitz you are calling has his idiotic phone switched off', message in a female voice she did not recognise.

As dawn had broken she had been beside herself with worry, actually. Both of her companions were out of circulation and little old she had been left to her own devices.

*Colour me impressed, not.*

Anji didn't cry very often – you didn't get a chance to in an office full of blokes who were either ruggierbuggers or *www.eastendbarrowboyswho'dmadegoodand-stilluvvedtheirmumsdarhlin.co.uk*. In her office, crying was something you did when the bonuses dipped below the twenty-grand mark. Trapped alone on Rubbish World didn't even come close. But Anji felt like crying now and had to busy herself with things to do or she would be reduced to a blubbering wreck.

After refusing breakfast, Anji walked across the corridor and let herself into Fitz's room. She half expected to see him lying on the bed snoring his head off beneath the open window where he'd sneaked back in. The room was a tip, clothes – well, big shirts – scattered over the floor in various stages of disrepair or culturing bacteria from food spills and alcohol. The bed hadn't yet been made by room service and the impression of Fitz's head still lay in the pillow.

Anji looked longingly at the ghost image, willing it to fill in with Fitz's body like a bad special effect.

It didn't.

OK. Be systematic. Any party invites? Flyers?

Anji began searching through the detritus of apple cores, crushed biscuits, bubble-gum wrappers and empty beer cans which were silting up most available surfaces in the room. It was like walking about inside a decayed tooth.

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*Ugh! Underpants! I just touched his Chuddies!! Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!*



Anji dropped the offending articles and continued to move stuff around more gingerly on the room's desktop. She uncovered a desk-mounted floppyscreen.

It was still on, showing a swathe of classified ads. Some of the text on the screen had been highlighted and as the light hit the flimsy surface she could see the shadow of a grease-line where a finger had been moved across the screen to increase the magnification.

The advertisement that was highlighted read, 'Become Another Person for One Night – *and* get paid for it!' – followed by an address down in the Rat's Kettle area of the old town.

*That'll be it, then.*

Anji took out her own floppyscreen, unfolded it, and wiped it across the advertisement.

Ping.

Ping?

An error glowed on her floppyscreen. The information would not transfer.

She tried again. Nada.

Now on top of everything else, she had to find a *bloody* pen.

Rhian awoke surrounded by guards pointing guns at her. Her body ached and he couldn't move. She was dimly aware of the Doctor's voice, fuzzy and incoherent in the background. It had the tone of someone trying to explain something very complicated to a very stupid person but she couldn't make out the actual words. She was more concerned about the guards and the guns.

The gun nearest to her said, 'She's awake.' The voice boomed loudly in her ears and startled her for a moment.

Rhian tried to take in some of her surroundings. The lights were bright and harsh, the ceiling further away than she was used to in the cell. The air smelled clean and there was a tang of something on it, like antiseptic but much stronger.

She was lying on her back on an inclined table and with blurry vision could see that she was strapped to a couch. There were various tubes

and wires attached to her body and she had been dressed in a plain satin gown that had a diamante cross embroidered into the front.

Hospital.

As she looked around the room, she could tell it was the hospital wing. She could tell that there was a whole other prison-ethos to the place – the bars had been painted pink. She could feel dried blood on her lips. Had she been injured?

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The last thing she remembered had been the Doctor leaping at her with a face contorted by fear and then. . . nothing.

The Doctor's voice was phasing into recognisable words now. The order seemed a little random and he was definitely still talking to someone who needed everything-explained-very-slowly.

'I don't know how I can put this in words of fewer syllables so that maybe you could understand. I had *nothing* to do with the sentinel's untimely fall from the sky or its collision with the Warderbot. I was far too busy trying to save my life and that of Ms Salmond.'

The voice that replied was thin and nasal; it hurt Rhian's head. She tried to turn on the table to see who the Doctor was talking to, but one of the guards placed his big gloved hand across her skull and turned her head back to its original position.

'Doctor, we know you have access to advanced technology; your assault on the museum is testament to that. There has not been a sentinel failure here in living memory. And the coincidence of this happening as you were about to be reprimanded by the Warderbot did not go unnoticed when we reviewed the incident.'

'It was a coincidence. Why is that so difficult for you to accept?'

'You may still be accessing superior technology.'

'Run a scan on me. You'll see that I'm not.'

'Is it also a coincidence that the scanners are all down?'

'Now, that I agree would be stretching the bounds of possibility, but I do refer the honourable gentleman to my previous answer.'

The lights flickered above Rhian's head and the room was plunged into darkness. She heard the guards' leather uniforms creak as they stiffened with anticipation.

'Is this your doing?'

'No!'

'Execute him.'

In the end she'd written the address on the back of a Tesco's receipt she'd found stuffed inside the lining of her Psion wallet. The receipt had been for a box of panty-liners, a bottle of Lambrusco, wild mushrooms, pepper sauce mix and a twelve pack of loo-rolls. She grew quite misty eyed at the list before turning it over to write. She tried to remember the meal she had cooked for Dave – some steak left over in the fridge and a tin of new potatoes. Wild mushrooms and the pepper sauce all tangy on her palate. They'd walked off the meal in the park; 70

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a quiet London summer evening, the roar of the traffic like a comforting hum, the pavements warm and the colours vibrant. They'd stayed out until the sun went down and had strawberry ice-lollies on the way home.

A million years ago.

Anji had to take the stairs to the ground floor of the hotel as the elevators were having problems with going down. When Anji had arrived at the top floor for the fourth time and in three different elevators, she gave up the ghost and headed for the stairs.

As she had gone through reception there was a gaggle of guests complaining at the desk. Voices were raised but she didn't wait around to see what they were upset about. The directions from the bemused room service clerk to the Rat's Kettle were all she was interested in.

The Rat's Kettle, as its appellation suggested, was a bit of a slum. The Room Service clerk tried to warn her off going there at all, or at least to not go there alone.

*What choice did she have?*

As she struck out towards the dingier quarter of the city the roads became thready, gloomier than the ones she'd already become familiar with. The fronts of the buildings were dirty and nowhere near as adorned as those in the areas of the city she had been travelling for the last week. People were scarce and, true to its name, rats were much more in evidence. Even the flocks of red bats seemed to be more numerous. Anji still couldn't bring herself to stamp on any casualties that fell around her, but the rats were more than happy to drag them off into the gutter to feed on among the rubbish.

The room service clerk's directions were adequate and she soon found herself in the street described in the advertisement. Stepping over the rubbish spilling from the doorways, Anji located the correct building and approached. She could imagine Fitz's sense of excitement and anticipation at getting involved in something of this nature, even if, looking at the location, it couldn't have been anything other than shady. The shop front was dark; the windows curtained with grey material that didn't look like it had been washed in many years.

The door was slightly ajar.

With apprehension, she placed her eye against the crack and tried to peer into gloom. Indistinct shapes lowered in the room beyond the door but she couldn't make anything out.

'Hello?'

Silence, save for the squeaking of rats behind her. She pushed the door and it swung back with a bang on well-oiled hinges. Anji clutched at her throat And What Are You In For?

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and felt embarrassed for moment. What if the room had been full of people?

Luckily, it was empty.

Really empty.

The floor was littered with pale, washed out patches, surrounded by neat rectangles of dust, marking where furniture had recently stood but had been hastily removed. Some pieces had been dragged across the floor, tearing up the floorboards with yellow splintered trails. Anji stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. Whoever had been here had obviously left in a hurry. Piles of floppyscreens lay

scattered in the corner next to a couple of empty wine glasses that were half full. Anji saw that the trails of splinters stopped at a door in the far wall. Something heavy had been dragged through.

The doorjamb was also splintered and dented.

She tried the door but it was locked. There was no other way out of the room, there being no stairs to the upper level. Anji placed her ear against the door and listened. She could hear muffled voices but could not work out if one of them was Fitz's.

Just in case it was not, Anji tiptoed back to the front door and let herself back out on to the street. She jogged up to the main thoroughfare, skipping over a group of rats busily feeding, and made her way around the end of the terrace to where the next street began. As she suspected the next street down was a service thoroughfare, allowing for deliveries and rear access. This street was piled with rubbish ankle deep. She made her way gingerly through the foul-smelling garbage, counting the back access-ways of the buildings until she was sure that she had reached the correct one.

Not knowing why, Anji felt this whole thing was getting shadier by the minute; cryptic advertisements; disappearing friends; premises left in a hurry.

She was either in a mess or an Enid Blyton novel. It was time to be cautious.

Looking around the edge of the gateway, Anji was greeted with the large snubby nose of a hovercar on low power. It rocked gently from side to side on its fields. Behind the vehicle, she could still hear the muffled voices. They seemed to belong to two men. She heard them struggling with something heavy and heaving it into the back of the hover, which sank towards the ground until its fields began to compensate.

Making a pained face, Anji lowered herself to the rubbish level of the street to look beneath the hover. Her cheek was resting against something wet and cold. She refused to look at it and breathed through her mouth so as not to be overcome by the smell.

She could see two pairs of legs moving about at the back of the hover. Neither

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of them looked like Fitz's. She held her breath and tried to listen to what they were saying. The background noise of the wheeling bats was still too loud.

Bugger, she'd have to get closer.

The rat popped up right in front of her face, its nose twitching and its black shiny eyes boring into Anji's. It cocked its head like a gastronaut eyeing a new menu and she was sure that the beast licked its lips. The rat made a fair attempt to bite her nose.

Anji screamed.

She pushed herself up from the detritus. As Anji rose she took in a stumpy, bearded, middle-aged man with what appeared to be a bib of vomit on the front of his expensive-looking suit and a creepy bloke sporting the kind of dead-eyed smile that, if Anji were writing about it, she would have described as maniacal, appearing from behind the hovercar. She did not hang about any longer as VomitBib was reaching inside his jacket.

She's seen that movie far too many times.

Time to run.

She heard laser shots blasting behind her. She tore through the rubbish, scattering waste and rats with equal contempt. Anji abruptly changed direction and dived into a mercifully opening back door, brushing past a startled bloke in a chefs outfit. Her shoulder hit him squarely and deposited him on to his backside in the trash, where he complained bitterly. Anji did not stop to explain that she was about to be shot and could he possibly put this *INTO SOME SORT*

*OF BLOODY PERSPECTIVE!*

She ran into the building, thence through a filthy kitchen and out into a dining area where a desultory bunch of diners paid little attention to her, seemingly more interested that the large floppyscreen nailed to one wall was just a whirl of grey static. She ran between the food-stained tables and headed for the door. She broke through to the street beyond and was happy to find a greater number of people around. She did not like the look of any of them, but at least they were not trying to shoot her. Without looking back, she continued down the street, towards where she knew the main thoroughfare to be. Coming out onto the road that bisected the Rat's Kettle, she paused and searched for a sign of law enforcement – there was none. Trying to lose herself

in the crowd was not an option; although there were more people, it did not in any way constitute a crowd.

She almost ran into CreepyEyedBloke.

They both gave a startled look and he began to reach for the inside of his jacket pocket to remove his holstered gun and then, looking about furtively, And What Are You In For?

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thought better of it. Anji took the opportunity to aim a desperate kick at his shins, but he easily sidestepped.

Then, CreepyEyedBloke said something that, under the circumstances, made Anji wonder what on earth he was talking about, even though she really ought to have been thinking about escaping. He said this: 'You're really much better with a rapier, Anjilina. Perhaps you should stick to them.'

Anji backed away, confused. *Anjilina?* CreepyEyedBloke came towards her, hands outstretched. Anji gathered the tattered remains of her composure, turned, and ran.

Straight into VomitBib.

Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!

VomitBib had been creeping up behind her and, as she turned, he made a grab for her. It was her revulsion that saved her. She slid backwards out of his reach, elbowing CreepyEyedBloke in the stomach and haring off down the road.

The last she heard of them was VomitBib shouting, 'My legs! Get after her!'

And a yell as he crashed to the ground, then CreepyEyedBloke saying, between harsh, winded breaths, 'I – think – she's – burst – my – stomach.'

Soon she was too far away to hear anything.

The Doctor and Rhian ran through the darkness that had enveloped the corridors of the prison. They hared at top speed, the Doctor slightly ahead, pulling Rhian along by her hand. Rhian still hadn't had enough time to check where she'd been injured by the exploding

Warderbot to have needed hospital treatment in the first place. She could feel that her arm was bandaged below the elbow and felt the roughness of a newly formed scab on her left temple, but other than that she could not tell, she had to keep running.

To be honest it had all been a bit of blur since the governor had given the order to execute the Doctor. All the guards' energy weapons had failed to fire, she heard them pressing impotently at the trigger studs and cursing. The next things that had happened were Rhian feeling the straps across her chest loosening and yells and screams as the guards were set upon by the Doctor.

There had been a confused fight, the Doctor screaming at the top of his voice, kicking over tables, and pushing guards into other guards and then he had grabbed her by the arm, yanked her off the table, and headed for the door.

The Doctor's night vision must be really good, Rhian concluded as they turned a corner in the darkness without pausing. The footsteps of the pursuing guards echoed behind as the dimness forced them to go much slower.

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Rhian also heard them at regular intervals hollering and crashing to the floor as they tripped over the obstacles that the Doctor and Rhian had already leapt over. But the trailing sounds were falling further and further behind.

Ahead, Rhian could see a dim light. Perhaps it was a window, or a door.

The Doctor did not seem to care, just increased his pace, seeming to be able to reduce his ambient friction at will. Rhian, who was not as fit as she would have liked – and far from being as fit as she should have been – was starting to flag.

The Doctor pulled harder on her wrist, tightening his grip.

The breath was burning in her lungs and her head was swimming with exertion.

Three things happened in quick succession.



The lights came back on.

The Doctor groaned loudly and bitterly.

The guards started firing their energy weapons.

Bolts of bilk light fizzed around them and molten areas of wall and ceiling spat hot globules at them. Rhian felt her hair burning as a liquid drop of concrete splashed on her head. She beat at the agonisingly painful area and tore out the cooling concrete along with a fair few strands of ginger hair. The Doctor pushed on towards the door at the end of the corridor.

The lights went out again.

The last few bolts sizzled past them, hurting their eyes. They hit the door and were out into the yard.

Out into chaos.

Prisoners were streaming from all directions. Some held aloft the battered remains of Warderbots that other prisoners were systematically beating with the butts of energy weapons. The Doctor led them into the middle of the crowd which seemed to be heading for the main gates. Rhian looked up and saw a sentinel – spinning, spluttering, and leaving a trail of smoke – clatter into the wall and drop with a sick whine. As it hit the ground, it exploded, sending shrapnel whirling into the air.

‘What’s happening?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I’m not sure. Some sort of fluctuating power loss. Seems to be affecting all of the prison. Localised EMP generator? Could be any number of explanations.’ He shouldered his way through the milling bodies, taking care to ensure that Rhian was protected from the excesses of the crowd of prisoners who seemed to be intent on venting their anger on anything that got in their way. He caught one arm as it scythed towards Rhian, gave a complicated twist, and the owner fell away with a yell. The Doctor caught And What Are You In For?

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Rhian around the shoulders and pushed her in front of him, protecting her back and head with his hands.

Cocooned by the Doctor, Rhian used her arms to insinuate between the bodies and pretty soon they were making fair progress towards the prison gates. As they passed through, the pressure of prisoners was released immediately. The Doctor and Rhian were carried along by the stream of bodies and were washed up on the roadside, breathless.

The Doctor lay back on the grassy verge, taking in huge gulps of air. Rhian sat with her head between her legs, feeling nauseous with a throbbing head.

Now that she could collect her thoughts in a relatively calm atmosphere devoid of exploding robots and gun-toting guards, she felt the anger and bitterness beginning to rise inexorably.

She leant over the Doctor and slapped his face. Hard.

The Doctor shot bolt upright, rubbing at the reddening mark on his cheek.

‘Excuse me?’

‘I didn’t *want* to escape, you idiot!’ Rhian shouted at him, tears streaming from her eyes.

Escape. Switch

‘It doesn’t matter what channel I tune it to, it still won’t work.’ Fitz thumped the side of the television again and the distorted picture rolled, a sick buzz of static emanating from the rooms’ concealed speakers. The bored voice of the room service clerk started to phase in and out of the receiver.

‘. . . Sir. . . sure. . . normal. . . possible. . .’

He threw the receiver down into the cradle on the bedside table and lay back on the pillows with a frustrated sigh. In all truth, even if he’d been able to get the damn TV to work he knew that he wouldn’t have been able to concentrate on it. *Where was she?* At two in the morning after a wonderful meal, an evening of eye contact and whispered promises, constant intimacy and a close-ness deeper than any he had felt before in his life, Carmodi had taken Fitz’s word that he would be a perfect gentleman to unanticipated levels of mistrust and had booked herself a room. It had been most unexpected, if not terribly frustrating. Fitz smiled wickedly at the delicious thought of what might have been and for a few seconds was suffused in the warmest of glows. However, as the morning wore on and the damn television

refused to work, Carmodi had still not returned.

Fitz held his stomach and groaned. Why did love have to hurt so much? *How can something so wonderful feel this horrible?*

He got up from the bed and pushed the trolley of uneaten breakfast across the room. It thudded into the wall, spilling orange juice on to the carpet. The very thought of eating now filled him with nausea. Hugging himself, he moved to the window and looked out on to the grey city. Rubbish blew along the streets, collecting in corners and alleyways, rats tore open discarded food containers.

Directly below his window a man in a particularly big and stupendously white shirt was thumping his wrist communicator and holding it to his ear. A hovercar drew up alongside, gusting refuse up into the air. The driver stuck his head out of the window and spoke to the pedestrian. White Shirt shook his head and pointed at his wrist communicator. The driver shook his head too and drove off. Other than that, the streets around the hotel were pretty much deserted.

Fitz wasn't surprised. Lebenswelt seemed like the kind of place where no one 76

Escape. Switch

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got up before midday.

Over on the south side of the city a plume of smoke was rising into the air. He could just see the roof of the building, yellow flames licking at the eaves. Tiny figures were running across the roof trying to escape the heat and smoke. He operated the window control and let a rank waft of air into the room. Once his stomach had stopped somersaulting he strained to listen. Funny, he thought, no sirens. This definitely was not the kind of planet to be unlucky on.

Short of running through the streets with a bucket of water there was nothing he could do, so he stepped away from the window.

And bumped into someone standing behind him. He tried to hide the yell of fear with his hand, but it escaped through his fingers anyway.

Gimcrack stopped dead in the corridor. The *Subject* was yelling. That didn't seem right. He checked the digital paper again, thumbing the scroll point feverishly. Text whirled over the flimsy page. Nope. The

girl hadn't booked anything kinky; at least the embarrassment factor wouldn't be too high when he kicked down the door.

Gimcrack walked forward a few more steps and came to the door of the room indicated by the hacked hotel register. The sniffer was clicking nicely now, proximity counter plunging down. The sniffer burped unexpectedly and from within the room there came another yell. . . Voice print analysis confirmed that yet again it was the *Subject*. With a frown Gimcrack noticed that the Proximity counter was now suddenly clicking away from zero. The *Subject* was moving.

*Time to kick down the door.*

The hotel room was empty. Gimcrack muttered a particularly bitter profan-ity as he saw the bed bereft of its mattress and the wide open window. With three quick steps he was looking down on to the street. Some guy was picking himself off the ground, seemingly after being hit by a comfy but very heavy mattress thrown from the hotel window. Gimcrack groaned and vaulted himself through, landing with a thump on the mattress and winding himself temporarily. He cursed at not having removed his utility belt first, its metal contents poking painfully into his side. He checked the proximity counter on the sniffer.

The screen flashed and went blank. That was all he needed.

Rising up, Gimcrack grabbed the pedestrian's throat – terrified eyes bulged as his tongue flopped out of the side of his mouth. 'Which way did they go?'

Gimcrack demanded.

The pedestrian was only able to respond with a choked gargle.

Gimcrack sighed. 'Point.'

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The pedestrian pointed. Gimcrack threw him to the ground and ran off in the direction indicated.

Spitting phlegm on to the pavement and rising to one knee, the pedestrian undid the buttons at his throat, breathing raggedly. 'They went the other way, sucker,' he said to Gimcrack's back as it

disappeared around the wrong corner.

They ran down the grey empty streets. Litter bustled along with them, the wind at their backs. Fitz was still annoyed. 'Don't ever come up behind me like that again!'

Carmodi whooped and squeezed his hand tighter. 'Not my fault you didn't hear me come into the room!' she called back, swinging him around into an alley, rats skittering in all directions. She pushed him up against a wall, holding him there with one hand, and then took a quick look back around the corner.

After a moment she seemed satisfied at what she saw and moved swiftly back with a smile, kissing him full on the mouth, pulling away with a delicious smack of lips.

*This was more like it.*

She traced the back of her hand down his cheek and thumbed the roughness where he hadn't yet shaved. She pulled him close. His face was buried in her hair. He felt her warm soft breath on the exposed skin, sending shivers across the nape of his neck.

'Sorry if I startled you back there.'

'OK, I forgive you,' he said into her shoulder. 'Perhaps now you'd like to explain why we just jumped out of the hotel window?'

Carmodi thought for a moment, the merest hint of a shadow passing over her features. It was gone in an instant and the smile was wider than ever. 'I've lost my credit chip. Didn't want to have to sell you into a life of slavery in the kitchens to cover the cost of our suites!'

Fitz laughed and flicked the end of her nose with his tongue. 'I could have paid, dumbos.'

She pulled away, smiling. 'My treat, toots. Come on.' She skipped off along the alley dragging him by his arm. Caught up in the madness of it, Fitz skipped too, kicking up the papers and cartons like surf.

Six communicator booths stood wrecked in a line. In the seventh and last, Gimcrack was shouting into the receiver with an increasing level of annoyance.

When he eventually paused for breath and was greeted with the continuous tone of a dead line, he wrecked that booth too.

He stumbled backwards out of the booth, sucking at his bleeding knuckles.

None of the tracing equipment worked, the digipaper was fritzed and there was no way of communicating with Darlow. What had begun as a simple recovery job was turning into a nightmare. He kicked the door shut on the booth and its glass frontage shattered with the impact, frosting like smashed ice. Suddenly aware that curtains were moving in the windows around him, Gimcrack hurriedly stalked away from the booths, head down. He was a good two clicks from the office where Darlow would be waiting impatiently for his call. It would take ten minutes to get there. Ten minutes for the *Subject* and *Client* to get further lost in the back streets of Lebenswelt's twisted North-side. Alone he'd never find them – perhaps if he got back to the office and got new batteries for the sniffer. . .

Gimcrack shook his head and sprinted off.

The North-side alleys had given way to the wide piazzas of the city centre. As the grey morning was burned off by the rising temperature, the crowds had gravitated there, filling the bars and cafés to bursting point. The only topic of conversation was the communication breakdown, affecting, it would seem, everyone; perhaps the whole planet. No one could be sure. There was no information.

'What do you mean, *leave* the planet?'

Carmodi made placating movements with her hands. The roadside café was jammed with customers all complaining that their TVs weren't working *and* that they couldn't make a phone call to complain about it. They were also complaining that the robot waiters were all off line and that the manager was getting them all to write IOUs before he would consider serving them. It had been many years since any of them had used paper for anything other than relating directly to a necessary bodily function. The shrillness of Fitz's tone was drawing glances. Glances which Carmodi did not seem to welcome.

'It'll be an *adventure*,' she said with a whisper into his ear, pausing to nibble sweetly at the lobe.

Carmodi had wanted to go straight to her apartment to pick up a few things before they got off planet. Fitz's ignored breakfast and the

shock of hearing Carmodi's plan to leave Lebenswelt had led him to sit directly at a table in the café and demand not only some brunch but also an explanation. 'Nibbling my ear may get you my undying love Carmodi – shallowness being one of my most endearing qualities – but I am not moving from this seat until you explain.'

He noted that while Carmodi was smiling and her torso seemed calm and at 80

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ease, the gentle trembling of the table where her knee rested against the metal leg indicated that not all was well. Carmodi drained her coffee and looked around at the crowds before speaking. 'Well I didn't want to say anything until we were away, but,' she paused for a deep, deep breath, 'I want you to marry me and live happily ever after, on. . . another planet. I'm bored with this one.'

Fitz's heart welled into his mouth. Not only was the most wonderful woman he'd ever met in love with him but she also wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

*This was perfect.*

Carmodi took another furtive look around and, pushing her chair backwards, she got down on one knee, held his hand and gazed up into his eyes. 'Fitz Kreiner, will you do me the honour of becoming my husband?'

Fitz looked around as the people at the nearest tables clapped and cheered.

He *actually* blushed.

*Oh, this was a dream come true.*

'Yes, yes, of course I will.'

Carmodi rose and kissed him delicately on the cheek. There was a chorus of *ahhs* from around the tables. She hugged him and he held her tightly. 'And the off planet thing? That as well?' She whispered.

*Anything.*

'Yes.'

Carmodi let him go and he fell back into his seat. 'Shall we get

married now or finish our croissants?’

Fitz couldn't think of a single reason not to do either.

It had been too much of a coincidence to ignore. Since waking up in her room and finding the TV, Radio and communicators were out of order, room service was unavailable and even the shower couldn't communicate effectively enough with the heating system to give her hot water for longer than fifteen seconds at a time, she knew that they were coming. Seeing Gimcrack walking out of the lift at the end of the corridor had quite frankly been a welcome diversion compared to what she knew would be visited on Lebenswelt soon.

This of course was *typical*. Just when she felt she was getting things sorted out *they* had found her.

The lift up to her apartment clanked and protested, its hawsers squeaking over old runners. Carmodi bit her lip, thinking hard. The communications on Lebenswelt had started failing at around nine that morning. The power outages were now coming in waves, recovering and waning with unpredictable Escape. Switch

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regularity. As the gaps between power on and power off became shorter, the palpable feeling of tension in the city became more intense. It wouldn't be a good idea to still be around in, say, ten hours. Better make it eight, she thought, just to be sure.

The lift shuddered to a halt and Carmodi had to draw back the door on its rusty hinges. The corridor was dimly lit and muddy pools of light from the skylights dotted the floor, sweeping over her face as she made her way to her apartment.

She opened the door.

‘Hello Ms Litian. Horrible place you have here.’

Darlow was standing in the main living space, hands deep in the pocket of his jacket. Carmodi felt a hand thud into the small of her back and she was propelled into the room, sprawling into the mess of the junked apartment. She landed at Darlow's feet; behind she heard the heavy steps of Gimcrack walking in. A boot was placed on to the side of her head, pushing it down into the carpet.

*What a fool she'd been.*



If they hadn't been able to trace her electronically, *of course* they'd have staked out her apartment. She should never have come back.

'Where is the *Subject*, Ms Litan?'

'He's gone.'

'That is a lie, Ms Litan.' Darlow came down on to his haunches. His breath smelled of yesterday's food. 'You have returned to your squalid domicile to take a few things before leaving the planet.'

'It wasn't squalid until you wrecked it.' The boot was pressed down harder, making her ear burn beneath the rubber.

'You are not the first *Client* we've had who's tried to steal a *Subject*. The very nature of the service we provide makes it an occupational hazard. We take a. . .

ah, dim view of such activity. Now do yourself a favour, Ms Litan, and tell us where you have stashed the *Subject*. Before the. . . ah, unpleasantness becomes an inevitability.'

With her one free eye Carmodi looked desperately around the room. Drawers had been pulled out of cupboards, their contents spilled out over the floor. Her TV was smashed, ripped away from the wall, wires exposed.

'OK. I'll tell you.'

'That's more like it. Now you tell us where he is and we'll –'

Summoning every ounce of strength in her body Carmodi flung out a hand, grasping for the ripped power cable of the television. Her scrabbling fingers

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found it and, praying that she hadn't pulled the other end from the wall socket, she stuffed it into Gimcrack's boot.

With a fizz and a bang Gimcrack was thrown across the room, smashed into the wall by the force of the shock. All the lights went out as the fuses blew. Carmodi brought her knees up and guessing that Darlow was still bent over, flung her head up, catching him under the chin and knocking him backwards over the arm of the sofa. Carmodi got to her feet and pelted from the apartment.

Gimcrack was getting up groggily, wincing at the pain in his ankle. Darlow was out cold. Gimcrack checked he was still breathing and then limped from the room after Carmodi's rapidly fading footsteps.

The taxi driver was getting impatient. Fitz flashed him a winning smile and watched as the driver puffed out his cheeks and used his podgy fingers to increase the tariff on the meter. 'I'm sure she won't be long. Just got a couple of things to grab from her apartment.'

The driver puffed out his cheeks again and wiped a sweaty hand down his filthy vest. Fitz refrained from smiling this time, just in case it cost them extra.

With a burst of warm air Carmodi flung open the door and landed in the seat beside him. Her face was flushed and there was a red mark across her ear. A sheen of sweat covered her forehead. 'Lift's out again. Sorry. Spaceport please.'

The driver sucked in his cheeks this time and gunned the hovers. The taxi rose into the air and headed away from the apartment block.

Fitz frowned. 'Are you all right? You've caught your ear on something.'

Carmodi smiled and rubbed at it with her trembling hand. 'It's nothing.'

'Where's your stuff?'

'Just wanted my other credit chip, we'll buy new stuff on honeymoon, yeah?'

New stuff for both of us. New start, yeah?'

*She's wonderful.*

If only he could remember why it was he might not want to be leaving Lebenswelt so soon. Couldn't be anything important.

*Especially if Carmodi wanted to marry him.*

He sighed and looked into her sparkling eyes. Why hadn't he ever felt like this about anyone before?

Carmodi slid an arm around him, pulling herself close, snuggling up tight.

They travelled in silence for a while, Fitz just enjoying the moment, watching the city sliding by as afternoon moved into night.

Suddenly the driver began cursing. Carmodi became quickly alert, shrugging off Fitz's arms and leaning into the front of the taxi. 'What's the matter?'

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The driver cursed a good few times before he answered. 'Effin' streetlights ain't coming on, are they? Bloody place is falling to bits. No streetlights, no effin' TV.'

The taxi driver hauled the controls to the right to avoid a stationary vehicle that loomed out of the darkness unexpectedly. He crashed his hand down on to the horn and uttered a flood of obscenities out of his window. This seemed to improve his humour somewhat.

Carmodi had been thrown back into her seat by the swerving taxi, thudding her head against the rear window. With horror Fitz felt her begin to shake uncontrollably. Her head lolled to one side, a thick dribble of mucus uncoiling from her lips, eyes rolling back into their sockets.

For the second time that day, Carmodi made Fitz yell.

The taxi powered down and bumped to the road, dislodging the mucus from the side of Carmodi's mouth. The taxi driver, not liking the look of what he was seeing in his rear view mirror, squeezed out of the cab and flung open the passenger door. 'Out!' he bellowed. 'I'm not 'aving another one of those *elepeptics* in the back of my cab. All manner of mess to clear up after the last one. Out!' With that he grabbed Carmodi by the blouse and heaved her out on to the street. Fitz followed, a sick coldness in the pit of his stomach.

'But you can't leave us here.'

The driver slammed both doors and started the hovers. 'If I see an ambulance I'll send them your way.'

The taxi sped off into the night.

Fitz cradled Carmodi's head on his knees. Her eyes flickered in the dim light, lips mouthing silent words.

*It's coming.*

*The Unnoticed.*

*I feel sick. There is a place. It's coming. End over ending, falling, there is a line.*

*A line. All this rush. All this fighting. All this. It's coming.*

*The Unnoticed.*

*I feel it, like now I feel it. There is pain. There is regret. Sometimes I'm built from regret. There was a rush; there was a pain. There is a point. A Point of Stillness. I rush towards it. I rush. There are bones in here too! I am on the line.*

*There is speed and there is chaos, there is finality.*

*The Unnoticed.*

*The Book of the Still.*

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The Book of the Still

‘What?’

Carmodi's eyes suddenly snapped open and her hands caught hold of Fitz's cheeks, forcing him to look into her eyes. ‘The Book of the Still,’ she managed to say before slipping back into unconsciousness.

Fitz let Carmodi slip gently to the pavement, placing his hand on the back of her head, feeling completely and utterly useless. At the back of his mind there was a feeling that perhaps he knew *someone* who could help, *someone* who would know what to do. *Exactly* what to do. The feeling evaporated without resolution. Fitz began to cry.

Carmodi woke into cold night. A chill frost had begun to seep through her clothing, stiffening the material, freezing her joints. She rolled on to one side, a raggedy headache scraping her temples. Looking at her watch, having to blink several times before she could focus on the digits, she could see they had barely four hours left before they wouldn't be able to leave at all. ‘We'd better get going on foot. We'll never find a taxi around here now.’

She was greeted only by a cold silence.

Fitz had gone.

I Don't Do This

'Stop rubbing it. It's not red any more. Get over it, move on.'

The power had come back on at the prison and the guards had started rounding up prisoners as best they could. The Doctor, realising that they must get away from the prison or face being locked up again, had asked Rhian if she minded him taking her away as quickly as possible; could she make her mind up reasonably quickly as he could see that the sentinels were recovering, and she and he knew they would be the first targets. . . possibly just make a snap decision, now. *Please?*

Rhian had thought seriously about slapping him again but had just settled for saying, 'Well I don't have any choice now do I, huh?'

They had disappeared into the warren of streets around the prison, swapped their hospital gowns for some velvet pantaloons and big white shirts that were being thrown out of (or waiting to be taken *into*, as Rhian piquantly suggested) a tailor shop ('What *are* we doing? *Collecting* gaol terms?'). The Doctor sighed and looked as though he was about to argue with Rhian about the urgency of moving on, but said nothing. He just sighed again and walked off. Rhian followed, doing up the last of the buttons on the big white shirt.

Now after five hours hard walking, they were back in the centre of the city where the power failures seemed to be in remission again. The Doctor nonchalantly read a floppyscreen over the shoulder of a man waiting in a queue to enter a restaurant. The floppyscreen was running a news report on the breakout from the prison. The Doctor smiled and pointed to a close up picture from a security camera that showed him and Rhian passing through the prison gates.

The man, whose floppyscreen the Doctor was watching, turned angrily to ask the Doctor to stop, saw the resemblance immediately, and began screaming,

'It's them! Escaped prisoners!'

Rhian grabbed Doctor and they pelted away from the restaurant. They ran until they were sure they were not pursued. Resting in a doorway the Doctor went down on his haunches and began rubbing at the side of his face where Rhian had slapped him earlier.

'Remind me why you hit me, would you?'

## The Book of the Still

‘I thought we’d covered that.’

‘Not really. You didn’t want to escape? They were going to execute me.’

‘Yes, you, not me. You’ve turned me into a fugitive without my permission!’

With good behaviour and an appeal based on diminished responsibility, I could have been out in a couple of months. Weeks even. Now I’m on the run with Doctor Shoot-On-Sight.’

‘Diminished responsibility?’

‘It doesn’t matter. What are your plans now? Does it involve us getting into even deeper doo-doo? Because if it does I would like a heads-up now so that I can prepare my sensibilities.’

The Doctor smiled and stood up. ‘Rhian, I’m sorry, I don’t usually have to ask people if they want to be rescued, it’s just an assumed thing.’

‘Yes, well, keep me fully informed from now on.’

‘Of course. Now, I suggest we first break into your hotel to get your things, and then break into my hotel to see if my friends are ready to help us steal the Book of the Still.’

‘Oh.’

‘You did ask to be kept informed. Shall we go?’

Fitzgerald felt somewhat naked without his sword and Connery was nowhere to be seen. Coupled to the above was the fact that Fitzgerald was in a city he did not recognise, full of strange people, most of whom travelled on fantastical levitating carts and spent their time complaining about something called a

‘power failure’.

Fitzgerald did not really understand their strange mode of speech and understood nothing of their ways. He just knew he had to find the

museum. An image of the building, a building he was sure he had never visited, was burnt into the blackness behind his eyelids. Every time he closed his eyes the imposing towers of the museum would be there like a mocking reminder that he had as yet failed to complete his mission.

That was another strange thing. He knew that he had a mission, knew that it had to be completed but could not for the life of him remember what the mission was.

He didn't feel like he'd been drinking.

He searched the inside pockets of his strange clothes for some sealed orders or papers that would explain his mission, but his pockets, although far from empty, held no explanation. He sorted through the weird objects he had pulled from his pocket. Several green packets that contained thin white rectangles of I Don't Do This

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paper, a flexible silver pouch holding pungent brown vegetable matter, a red tube that held some unknown liquid and a transparent square of unknown material which when unfolded lit up and was covered in moving pictures. Fitzgerald had dropped the article on to the pavement as it had startled him somewhat.

He'd edged towards the seemingly miraculous material as it lay on the ground, one corner flapping in the breeze. The amazing moving picture, accompanied by loud and raucous music, showed a man in a silver suit dancing ridiculously and then going down on one knee, raising his arm and saying, 'Thank you very much.'

Wild applause and screaming burst from the picture. Fitzgerald was startled again and fell on to his back.

Best to leave it where it was and continue to find the museum, he surmised.

Fitzgerald walked quickly away from the man in the silver suit who was now singing about breaking rocks in the Bridewell.

The Doctor waited at the bottom of the fire escape. Rhian clattered down the bronze and silver stairs at a speed she did not find comfortable, but was preferable to being seen by the roomservicebot which had entered the room just as she was climbing out of the window, clutching a bag of essentials. She hid back against the wall,

trying to seep into the bricks. She had never been very good at heights and her room was on the top floor of the hotel. She edged as far away from the window as the gantry would allow and heard the roomservicebot whirring forward across the room.

Adding breaking and entering seemed pretty small beer compared to what was already on her list of felonies. She wanted to blame the Doctor for it all; that would have been the easiest thing to do. But not one that was based on the entire truth. She had brought the initial problems on herself. If only she'd been able to get a look at the Book.

Now the Doctor was planning to try to steal it again. Her head said that the idea was insane. Her heart. . . Her heart was a completely different matter.

The roomservicebot arrived at the window. Rhian held her breath, even though she knew that there was no way it could hear her over the roar of the city and the squeal of the bats flocking in huge swarms in the darkened sky.

The 'bot shut the window and closed the curtains. Now she was clattering down the stairs and she could see the Doctor's curly hair blowing in the wind below as he kept watch. What was she doing? What on Sirius One Bee was she getting involved in?

*Shut up, head. No one was asking you.*

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She made the last of the steps and was glad to have her feet back on the ground. She looked up at the dizzying height of the fire escape. Her stomach flipped.

*That wasn't nice.*

'Please don't ask me to do that again. I wasn't built for these kinds of escapades. I'm an academic. I read texts, spend time in libraries, make up a fourth for bridge if my mother can stand to have me around for the evening without "boring her to death with my musty theories", I don't get involved in relationships and I don't do *this*.'

'You also babble when you have high levels of anxiety and adrenalin. Don't worry, those sorts of responses should level off after a few days with me.'



‘Comforting.’

The streetlights went out and the city was plunged into darkness. Rhian felt herself moving instinctively towards the Doctor. The bats overhead became indistinct squeals and leathery flapping – suddenly not being able to see the bats made them an uncomfortable presence above their head.

The darkness was suddenly pushed back by a bright tongue of flame and her ears were pressured by a shockwave of air from the large explosion. They shielded their eyes from the brightness, and the Doctor began moving forwards.

Rhian pulled on his arm. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

‘To see if anyone needs help.’

‘Won’t that make us just a little exposed?’

‘Possibly, but I’d rather that than see someone killed unnecessarily. You can wait here if you want.’

Rhian let his arm go and made a face that she would never have pulled in a place that was lit. ‘We’ve got to find a better way of negotiating our courses of action you know. This just isn’t working!’

A hoverbus had crashed into a wall as the power had failed. The windows along one side were buckled but not broken. The engine was on fire and there were passengers trapped inside. The Doctor ran to the stricken vehicle, passing through a semicircle of onlookers who were watching the hoverbus burn.

Rhian followed him through the crowd and was appalled to see that no one was trying to help. Rhian could see the silhouettes of hands banging desperately on the twisted glass and could hear screaming. The Doctor was running along the length of the bus, trying to jump up and see what was happening inside. He couldn’t get close to the front of the vehicle as the flames were too intense.

I Don’t Do This

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‘The firebots’ll be here soon! Don’t be a hero!’ someone called from the crowd. Rhian rounded on the voice. ‘It may have escaped your notice but there’s no power!’

The face behind the voice dropped its eyes and turned away from Rhian's hard stare.

*So much for keeping a low profile.*

Oh well. 'Well, are you all going to stand there?'

Rhian ran to the Doctor, who was desperately beating at the back window of the bus with a chunk of paving slab that had been dislodged by the crash.

The paving slab was awkward to hold and the window was very tough. Rhian looked up at the glass and saw faces pressed against it, the eyes were frightened and mouths slack and open, gasping for air.

Four members of the crowd joined the Doctor in beating at the glass. Rhian searched around for her own piece of slab and settled on a jagged section of pavement which she lifted and began hammering against the window.

Soon some progress was being made; a dent was forming that, with concentrated efforts from the Doctor and the others, was starting to show signs of stress. A web of cracks was growing across the surface and the Doctor was beating at them with renewed vigour.

When the window finally gave way there was a rush of black smoke and an explosion that threw them all back on to the ground. Rhian found herself painfully struggling beneath an unconscious woman.

*Just how many times am I going to be blown up today?*

Rhian made it back to the window and began helping to pull out those inside. The Doctor had climbed up on to the bumper of the bus and was more inside the vehicle than out. He lifted out a screaming child and handed her to Rhian. Rhian took the bundle and ran to a safe distance. The child didn't seem to be injured other than having breathed in smoke. She coughed noisily but otherwise seemed intact. Rhian began to run back to the bus, but as she did so the girl started to scream. Rhian turned and was about to deliver the

'wait there while I help some more people, you'll be fine' speech when she was stopped in her tracks.

The girl had disappeared under a flurry of bat wings.

Fitzgerald found the dark streets even more disconcerting than the

moving picture material. His senses were heightened and he moved stealthily in the shadows. Dark areas of cities were notorious places for brigands and cutthroats. An unknown city, much more so.

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## The Book of the Still

There was no moonlight to speak of, but his experiences of night fighting on the Germanic campaign had sharpened his vision sufficiently to cope with the present surroundings.

Before the city had been plunged into darkness he had interrogated a fat, oily local whom Fitzgerald had found kicking at the sides of his non-hovering vehicle. The fat oily local, who had a badge on his chest marking him as 'Taxi Driver', had given him directions to the 'effin' museum and had expressed hopes that the 'effin' hemlock groves spontaneously poisoned him. He'd also said something about 'not you again' and 'effin elepeptics', but Fitzgerald had not understood.

Fitzgerald had, however, backhanded the cur as an unreasonable feeling of hatred rose within him. He didn't really understand where the feeling had come from. It was as if Taxi Driver had done him a great wrong at some point but he could not recall it. Taxi Driver had punched ineffectually at Fitzgerald's back as he had walked away. Fitzgerald had turned and fixed him with his most menacing stare and Taxi Driver had slunk back to his vehicle.

Now, in the darkness, Fitzgerald was approaching the environs of the museum. It loomed blacker than the night above him. He was reminded of a dark, gothic *Schlo*'s high in the mountains of Transylvania that he had spent an uncomfortable night within, fighting its demonic occupant. Fitzgerald had not drunk red wine since.

Whereas in the streets outside the museum there were confused and angry people milling around, no one appeared to be here. The gardens were empty, the approaches clear. An ornamental lake that glittered with starlight and from which a strong breeze was blowing held no fowl, just the flickering reflection of the bats circling overhead. Fitzgerald's approach to the main building was unchallenged and he ascended the stairs to the main entrance doors, no longer feeling the need for stealth.

The place was obviously deserted.

He pushed against the heavy oak doors and they swung back, revealing a long corridor that was subsumed into blackness just a few yards within. Fitzgerald paused at the doorway and looked back over the dark city. Fires were burning at regular intervals and he could hear screams piercing the night. What a nightmare place. Perhaps the only answers lay inside the museum. He had found scant explanation out on the streets. The breeze off the lake chilled him and he pulled his jacket up to his neck.

As night had fallen, Anji had felt all the more alone. Sure she'd lost the hunters I Don't Do This

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in the warren of Lebenswelt's streets and, having left the Rat's Kitchen far behind her, she was sure that Fitz was in deep trouble or possibly dead. Those guys had been playing for keeps.

Then if that thought hadn't been bad enough she'd been drinking a well earned cup of coffee in a bistro and seen the news reports about the prison breakout – and then two sets of mug-shots under the heading 'dangerous fugitives'. One was a dumpy, ginger-haired woman wearing glasses and a bemused expression and the other was, of course, the Doctor.

How could it not have been?

Now he was a dangerous fugitive who was considered so dangerous they needed to single him out from amongst two hundred hardened criminals. They really didn't want to take any chances with him, did they?

Then a power failure had hit the bistro and the screen had gone blank, just like the one in the restaurant earlier.

Just before VomitBib's legs had stopped working.

Anji wondered just what could happen to make the day worse.

She got back to the hotel but was refused entry as her credit chip couldn't be verified under the prevailing conditions and until the guest recognition system was back online; would she like a complimentary glass of tap water while she waited?

No *thank you*.

It was a long walk back to the TARDIS.

She reasoned that if the Doctor was a fugitive then this would be the first place he would come. As she entered the park where the TARDIS had landed she saw the familiar blue shape through the trees. This was the first good thing that had happened all day.

As she approached the TARDIS she felt in her pocket for the key.

*Bugger Bugger Bugger Bugger Bugger Bugger Bugger Bugger Bugger* It was in the hotel room. The hotel room she couldn't get back into.

No bath then. All right, so the day could get worse.

Now that night had fallen and the city lights had come back on, what should she do? Wait here for the Doctor or go back to the hotel, where she could now be at least assured of a bath?

The park atmosphere had changed considerably as darkness had fallen and thousands of bats were milling overhead in jittery flocks. Anji's mind was made up and she jogged from the park back to the hotel – renewed with the thought of a bath and a bed. In the morning she would get her stuff together and move back into the TARDIS and use it as her base of operations. That sounded good.

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Having a base of operations sounded just the sort of galvanising motivator she needed right now. It sounded like she meant business, not like she was a lost and lone Earth-girl too far from home.

She liked to think that she had the resilience to cope with these situations.

I mean, she'd been through enough with the Doctor and Fitz over the last few months, certainly. But there was something oppressive and dark about Lebenswelt, she'd felt it since they'd arrived. *Since no one had listened to me about getting off planet.* No. No point in getting bitter. Base of operations, that was it. Get systematic on the problem. That would be the thing to do.

As she reached the doors of the hotel, the power failed again.

Would she like a complimentary glass of water now?

Anji got bitter at that point, and quite twisted too.

The Doctor and a few of the other hefty onlookers who were now fighting for their own lives shouldered open a door into a large warehouse-like building, dragging the more severely wounded from the crash inside. Rhian ushered in the walking wounded and beat at the bats who were trying to attack the young girl again. Rhian tried to stem the flow of bleeding from the wounds on the girl's upper arm. The wounds were deep but not life threatening. She had surprised herself with her reaction as she'd seen the girl beneath the writhing wings, wading in without a thought for her safety, beating at the red creatures with the bag of things she'd got from her room. The Doctor had come to help and between them they got the girl out and carried her over to the crowd.

Then the flocks of bats had attacked them all.

Screaming out of the sky, the bats swarmed, talons extended and teeth nip-ping. The Doctor got one tangled in his locks. Rhian pulled it out and flung it away. The Doctor, seeing that their situation was not good, located the nearest door and began to try to break it down. With help from the others they were now inside the dark space and the bats did not seem to want to follow.

The Doctor was tending to the wounded, tearing strips from shirts, making bandages, and ordering people off to find some water in the building.

Rhian helped the little girl search among the victims until they found her mother. The woman had a deep burn on her right arm but now was more than glad to see her daughter, who hugged her immediately and began to cry.

All the time, Rhian could hear the screeching of the bats outside as they circled above, returning to fighting among themselves. When the Doctor had finished tending to the burns and the bites, Rhian asked him why the bats had suddenly turned on them.

I Don't Do This

‘Opportunistic attack, I suspect. They’re noticing the people in the city have become more vulnerable, more fearful. . . vibrations which they’re disposed to seek out. The girl was in a state of shock after what had happened on the bus.

They couldn't resist.'

'Do you think it's happened all over the city?'

'I wouldn't be at all surprised.'

Fitzgerald entered the Still Room. The tube of liquid in his pocket had turned out to be a device for making a flame. He'd almost singed his eyebrows finding that out, but it was certainly making his journey through the museum easier.

The chamber was high and domed. He could dimly make out that the ceiling had recently been repaired. He had still not encountered one other person throughout the building.

Several things were alarming however. Chief among them was the fact he seemed to remember the route through the museum to the Still Room and he was sure that he had never been here before. He was concerned that he was getting other memories from a life he knew nothing about. These memories were flashing through his mind at regular intervals; they were bright, noisy, and concerned situations that again he was sure he had not been in. He'd been trapped in bedchambers many times with pretty women while their husbands approached up the stairs, but never had he elected to leave the bedchamber by the window, jumping down on to a mattress, and never at the behest of the woman with whom he was having his assignation.

He recognised the woman in the memories but couldn't place her name.

There was an overwhelming feeling of nausea in some moments and in others a deep love that plucked at his heart and caused him a fibrillating pain in his stomach.

The feeling of first love in the body of a young buck.

He had not felt anything like that for years.

At every other moment he felt like turning back, but the compulsion to continue, to complete the mission became paramount. Fitzgerald managed to compose himself enough to continue his slow walk across the Still room to where the Book rested innocuously on a raised plinth.

As he closed in on the Book the rush of nausea overtook him again

and it was all he could do not to vomit.

He fell to his knees and reached for the Book.

Unknown memories screamed inside his skull. Filling up the silence with fear and sickness, he clutched the Book to his chest.

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Fitz rolled on to his back with a sigh. ‘Carmodi.’

Trying to keep his head as still as possible so as not to wake the headache that was slumbering hot and heavy behind his temples, he tried to remember where he was.

It was dark and cold.

In one hand he held some sort of book, in the other his zippo. Christ, he hadn’t had a fag for hours. He sat up and immediately wished he hadn’t. He’d woken the headache.

Carmodi!

He staggered to his feet and that was a definite mistake. Must get back to Carmodi. He remembered her fit in the taxi and her slipping into unconsciousness then wham! Nothing. Just waking up here, with a book in his hands.

A book.

The Book of the Still.

‘Carmodi?’

At this point the power was restored and the lights came back on in the Still Room. Fitz was standing in a circle of grounded sentinels.

The sentinels started to stir.

Fitz held the Book as tight as he could and began to run.

Leaving Without Saying Goodbye

Carmodi felt that on top of everything else, being attacked by bats was just not at all fair. She had a Book to steal; a time traveller to find and



a planet to get the hell off before it was scoured clean like a zero-gee cue-ball.

She beat at the squealing creatures with her hands, windmilling her arms and kicking out with her feet. Why were they doing this now? All she had ever seen them do before was fight each other. Having the same meal over and over again was boring, she knew, but still. . .

Still.

*The Book of the Still.*

If she could get it away from Lebenswelt, perhaps she could save the planet.

Getting off planet was not, however, going to be easy. Finding Fitz in a room full of Fitzs was going to be easier than tracking down the Resonance Corridor.

The bats came at her again. She caught one in her hands and twisted it roughly until she felt something snap and the creature went limp. She threw it away and watched as the bats attacking her turned on their dead comrade.

Carmodi took the opportunity to walk slowly away. When she was convinced she was far enough to not stimulate bats with her sudden movement, she began to run. Four hours did not leave anywhere near enough time.

She headed instinctively for the museum. Everything came back to the Book.

When she had flipped out and started channelling the Unnoticed, Carmodi had seen the Book featuring large in the resonance. The Unnoticed were coming for the Book. Moving the Book now became the paramount consideration.

It was while considering this that she ran into Fitz. She felt him before she saw him, a mist of slithery *bockatrons*, tingling her areas of higher functioning.

His face was alive with joy at seeing her and her heart leaped at the sight of him turning the corner and running to meet her.

She tried not to think of one of those sloppy holos where the lovers meet on the moor and run towards each other in slow motion. She

failed and was lost in the music of particles.

Fitz saw Carmodi as he turned the corner and could not believe his luck. He had 95

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taken a random route as fast as he could from the museum and its awakening defence mechanisms. He had seen the sentinels in action inside and outside the courthouse for the Doctor's trial; he knew that he would not have stood a chance if he had stuck around to say 'Hi' and whatnot.

The waves of nausea and the headache had subsided somewhat since he had made it back on to the streets of Lebenswelt. It was curious that although the streets were in darkness, there were no lights on at any windows and various parts of the city were exploding merrily to themselves. He remembered the power failures and the communication breakdowns of the previous day when he had been at the hotel with Carmodi – before he'd agreed to get married and leave the –

Yes, he had agreed to. . .

Leave the planet.

*Yes. That's right. Seemed like the right idea, nothing to hang about here for, was there?*

Now he was back in Carmodi's arms. She had thrown them around his neck and hugged him close, her feet lifting easily off the ground, and he swung her round and round until they were both dizzy. They let go of each other and spun away, clattering against a wall in fits of laughter.

When the laughter subsided, he reached inside his jacket. Fitz held out the Book to Carmodi, whose eyes widened and a look of pure astonishment lit up her face. 'Is this what you were asking for, Madam?'

Fitz bowed and put the Book gently down into her upturned palms. Carmodi ran her fingers over the cracked leather surface.

This was the first time that Fitz had had a proper chance to look at the

object he had removed from the museum. The Book was small and bound in what looked like grey leather. Some words, etched in gold leaf, glimmered on the cover, but Fitz could not read them. They seemed to swirl on the surface of the Book until after several seconds of staring they resolved themselves into 'The Book of the Still' in a plain, nondescript font.

He estimated the Book to be perhaps ten inches by ten, about the size of a hotel guest-book; it did not look inordinately thick, perhaps a hundred or so pages, their edges gilded with gold-leaf. Carmodi was holding the Book close to her nose as if she were smelling it.

She *was* smelling it! A sincere mask of rapture had beatified her face, her eyes were closed, and she looked to be in the grip of an ultimate pleasure. Her body was trembling like a telephone wire in the wind.

*Steady on.*

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He touched her face and snapped her back to the here and now. He saw a flash of anger pass swiftly across her face, which was then replaced by a smile.

She hugged him close again, holding the Book tight between them. She put her mouth to his ear. 'It's time for us to go. We've got a ship to catch.'

Fitz's heart thudded agreeably in his chest.

*Yes. Anything.*

Power returned to the city some half an hour later. Fitz and Carmodi were making good progress towards the wharf, thankfully not troubled by bats again.

They had completed most of the journey in silence, staying as close to each other as was possible while walking so quickly. Fitz had managed to keep hold of Carmodi's hand throughout. He felt stupidly proud of this fact, as if it would spoil the magic if he were to let go. When he got the opportunity, he would kiss the top of her head and breathe deeply on the smell of her hair. At those moments, he felt he was probably giving a fair approximation of Carmodi's rapturous face from earlier. He could not think of anywhere he would rather be right

now.

*Er. . .*

Nope, he was right. He could not.

As the power returned Carmodi suggested that they ‘borrow’ one of the many abandoned hovercars and drive the rest of the way to the wharf. Fitz thought it was a brilliant idea and they chose a red and gold hovercar that reminded him of a beach buggy but with a lot more chrome. He began humming a bunch of choice tunes from Pet Sounds as Carmodi gunned the engine and they lifted off.

Switching from ground effect to anti-grav, the buggy lifted neatly into the air, favouring its nose and causing Fitz to stop acting macho and actually strap himself in. Carmodi giggled as she saw him slyly drawing the belt across his knees.

Carmodi looped the buggy.

Fitz screamed like a girl.

The Doctor and Rhian left the warehouse when it was clear the return of power would quickly bring the authorities to transport the wounded to medical facilities. The fire was still burning fiercely in the bus and had raged throughout the passenger space. Rhian shivered as they passed it even though the heat was intense, thinking about the consequences for the passengers if they had not managed to open the rear window. The Doctor seemed lost in his own 98

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thoughts and Rhian had to pull him into an alleyway as sentinels and police hovers whooshed towards them up the street. When they had passed, Rhian led the Doctor by the arm back on to the road and urged him quickly on. Perhaps he was suffering from delayed shock – she remembered his eyes as he had beaten with desperate force on the back of the hoverbus, his face set and grim; his eyes far away. Had she imagined tears?

She studied his face. It was a blank mask, his eyes were cast down, and there was a bubble of saliva forming at the corner of his mouth. He was beginning to walk stiffly as if his knees and elbows had fused.

‘Doctor?’

The Doctor mumbled something and then pitched forward on to the pavement – it was all Rhian could do to lower him to the ground to stop his head bouncing off the plasticrete. The Doctor's body convulsed and he began to shake uncontrollably. Rhian looked about desperately, hoping that this would not draw attention to them. A darkened doorway some metres ahead looked like a good place to hide and so Rhian dragged the shaking Doctor towards it and pushed him as far in as she could.

What sequence of events had turned Rhian into someone who would worry more about being captured than caring for her obviously helpless companion?

She pressed herself back into the doorway as another group of sentinels flew past at street level. She hoped the shadows would hide them.

She knelt by the Doctor, who was shivering now, rather than caught in a full-blooded fit. His voice was returning and he was murmuring words just out of reach of Rhian's hearing. She cradled his head as best she could and prayed that no one would walk past the doorway.

Eventually the Doctor's shivering subsided and his body relaxed. Rhian's concerns abated as he opened his eyes and fixed her with a wide smile.

'This is getting to be a habit,' he said in a much brighter tone than Rhian was expecting. 'Perhaps, I should see a Doctor.'

Rhian ignored the pun. 'What happened? Are you all right?'

The Doctor felt his arms and legs and all the way around his head. 'I appear to be. Just blacked out again. There. . . there's something. I. . . the last time this happened was just after we'd arrived. Yes, on top of the observation tower, just before I tried to. . . The Book of the Still.'

'Steal it?'

'Yes. I was overcome by an intense need to get to the Book, to get it into my possession. And I'm feeling it again. It's like the greatest sense of need I can ever imagine.'

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He held at his stomach and groaned.

‘Like love,’ he said simply, and got up.

The Doctor placed his hands on Rhian’s shoulders and fixed her with his eyes.

Tears sparkled in them like comets orbiting the planets of his pupils. There was a whole universe behind his eyes and Rhian was suddenly energised by his urgency.

It hurt.

She blinked and shook her head. There was a pain, as if there was too much to fit inside her mind for a moment and she had to break away.

When she opened her eyes again the Doctor said, ‘Rhian, there’s something coming, something terrible. It’s connected to the power failures and communication breakdowns, I’m sure of it. The two times I’ve become unconscious, I’ve been tapping into something. I don’t know what it is, or why it’s happened, but I do know we’ve got to get to the Book.’

Checking that the road and the air were clear of sentinels, the Doctor led them away from the shadows.

The night was chilly and still quite a long way from morning. The stars were sharp in the cloudless sky. Rhian had never met anyone like the Doctor; his determination and his sense of purpose were elemental forces that just swept her along with them, like a small boat tossed on a raging sea. Rhian had not felt in charge of her actions since they had left the prison. She felt more than a little ashamed for striking the Doctor and for appearing so petulant. She was not going to let him know that, of course. It seemed that her only chance of getting sight of the Book now rested with the Doctor and, although she felt vulnerable, in danger, cold and hungry, it was, she reasoned, the best policy to stick with him. He was bound to get to the Book eventually.

That was why it came as such a surprise when he told her that they were splitting up.

Anji luxuriated in the bath and relished the tingle of squiffiness that was enveloping her as the level in the champagne bottle went down and down.

And down.

She was starting to feel nicely insulated against the terrors of reality. The loss of Fitz, the Doctor, and the men trying to kill her. Funny how baths and champers made that all go away. Perhaps becoming an alcoholic would make the rest of her life on Lebenswelt bearable.

That jogged at her heart in an unpleasant way.

*The rest of her life.*

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Surely the Doctor wouldn't go and get himself killed, would he? And Fitz, good old resilient Fitz, would be living it up somewhere and would be back, to pick up his denims at least.

It shocked Anji that she was even considering the possibility of the Doctor and Fitz never returning. It was like giving up. She had been separated from them many times before, but there seemed to be a *notgettingoutofthis* vibe going down this time that outweighed all the others.

Vibe?

God I miss you, Fitz. At least come back so that I can have one last go at you.

*Please.*

Huh! Even the alcohol was deserting her now. She did not remember being the kind of person who at the end of a party would be throwing her arms around people slurring. 'I-bloody-love-you-I-do.' And then crying into their shoulders. Well, at least she did not remember ever doing that. However, now, as the water of the bath was losing its heat, the bubbles were dissipating, and the champagne was losing its fizz, Anji felt a bruise of melancholy blackening her mood.

Better stop drinking, huh?

She heard the door to the hotel room open outside the en suite bathroom.

Her heart leaped! Only the Doctor and Fitz had access-chips! It must be one of them. She splashed from the bath and grabbed for her robe, slipping her thin arms into it as she made for the door.

Anji left the bathroom with a smile on her face, ready to forgive Fitz and the Doctor anything.

Her smile froze.

‘Hello,’ said the dumpy, ginger-haired stranger, ‘you must be Anji.’

The wharf was out on the northern edge of the city, backed by high mountain ranges on one side and the huge flat expanse of sea on the other. A thin isthmus of land led to the wharf, which was located on an artificial island.

As with most things on Lebenswelt it was over-designed and over-accessorised. The basic structure was that of a crystal crown, circular with impossibly thin spires needling the sky. It blazed with light and Fitz had been able to see its glow from many kilometres back. Carmodi had relented to his ever more anxious requests to have the buggy nearer the streets on ground-effect in case the power gave out again, but she could not resist skimming out low over the waves as the city thinned to the isthmus. Spray glittered on the windscreen as they approached the breathtaking structure of the wharf.

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Fitz began to pick out hovers buzzing around the spires, air ships slung with cargo containers and huge starships waiting at gantries to take off. There seemed to be activity at all corners of the wharf. If he squinted, however, he could make out patches in the crystal that had been blackened by fire and the crews working to fix damage. The power failures had obviously reached this far out of the city. What if it had been a planet-wide phenomenon? Would they be able to leave the planet? What would happen if a power failure hit while they were taking off? Fitz had raised these, he felt, very real concerns with Carmodi. She had answered by doing something wonderful between her fingers and the back of Fitz’s neck and he had been distracted enough to forget the questions. Now as the wharf loomed ever closer, the apprehension was rising in him again. Carmodi swung the buggy up on to a landing stage and hopped out. Fitz, the questions caught in his throat, followed her without a word.

Fitz thought that this was unusual behaviour for him, but he could not produce any examples from his past that would help to give him any evidence to prove the statement. Actually there were great gaps in his memory. He remembered large chunks of his childhood and



remembered having a bad time at school. Then there seemed to be memories of a military academy in seventeenth-century Prussia, a certain amount of sword fighting and his evil nemesis Duke Doctori. Fitz couldn't reconcile the thought of anyone in fifties London ever acquiring an evil nemesis or cultivating a deep and all-consuming love for a woman called Carmodi Litian on forty-first century Lebenswelt, a planet that he could be buggered if he could remember how he'd got to.

Carmodi had seen him lagging behind and had done the neck thing again, and had kissed the worries away.

Anyway, all that could wait for later, Fitz concluded. Why waste a second with the woman of his dreams?

The beeping from the sniffer was getting satisfactorily more frequent. Gimcrack brought it back inside the hover and wiped the co-ordinates into the hover's autopilot. It had taken nearly an hour since the power had come back on for the sniffer to pick up Fitz's trail and at last he would have some good news to report to Darlow. At least it might save him from being hit again.

Darlow had not been having a good day. While Gimcrack had been out searching for Fitz and Carmodi, Darlow had been throwing up and chasing acid-girls from Svadhisthana's dream machine. When Gimcrack had arrived at the wharf where Darlow and Svadhisthana were making their final prepara-102

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tions to erase all evidence of their existence on Lebenswelt, Darlow had still not managed to change out of his vomit-encrusted suit. Gimcrack had had real trouble standing next to his employer. Darlow had ordered Gimcrack to help him unload the hover and get all the equipment into the flight cases.

Mercifully, Gimcrack had heard the sniffer start up unexpectedly and it was giving a good signal on Kreiner. He was obviously in range. Perhaps he was on the wharf, too? Darlow, still itching for recompense, sent Gimcrack off with orders to bring Kreiner and Carmodi back dead or alive. He wanted her real credit chip very badly indeed.

He had left Svadhisthana hacking into the city's hotel recognition registers, trying to find Anjilina. Darlow really was miffed about having to move operations off planet and wanted to kick tons of butt

to make himself feel better.

Gimcrack whisked the hover outside the wharf, heading across the waves, skimming up a white spray, sporadically sticking the sniffer out of the window to pick up the trail. Gimcrack eventually brought the hover down on to the landing stage where Carmodi had parked the buggy and the sniffer was clicking like crazy. Gimcrack disembarked and swung the sniffer around. It went off the scale as it pointed directly at a sporty little hover. Gimcrack stuck the sniffer into the buggy, recalibrating the DNA sequence of the two occupants, filtering any extraneous noisy DNA that did not match the targets', thumbing the wheels on the top of the device to set the parameters.

At least Svadhisthana had been right, they had not got themselves recoded down at Child's place.

Gimcrack raised the machine and squinted at the display. Judging by the freshness of the samples the sniffer was leeching out of the air, they had about an hour's head start on him. That was nothing. The sniffer would lead him all the way there.

Gimcrack considered calling Darlow now and letting him know how close he was – however, he didn't want to tempt fate or miss out on a bit of fun. He would wait until Carmodi was *slapped* and Kreiner was *punched*. Then he'd call Darlow.

Gimcrack removed his head from the buggy and his heart skipped several beats.

A flash of sword-play, an evil grin and duelling scars were suddenly replaced by a smiling face surrounded by lush curls. 'Hello,' said Doctori, 'I'm new around here. Could you point me in the direction of the embarkation suites?'

The face and the curls were attached to a body that had just landed beside Gimcrack on a silent airbike. The face, curls and body dismounted in a smooth Leaving Without Saying Goodbye

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fluid motion and stepped towards him.

Luckily Gimcrack recovered enough from the shock to hit the face with a scything uppercut that lifted it and its body right off its toes to fall unconscious to the floor.

Gimcrack would have to call Darlow now.

Fitz had to be impressed by a woman who claimed to be able to fly a starship.

However he was much more impressed by a woman who had enough credit on her credit chip to buy one.

Carmodi was making the last of the pre-launch checks and Fitz was having trouble operating the seat webbing so that he could be strapped in. Carmodi had told him to prepare for a bumpy ride in that nonchalant tone of voice that was designed to keep you calm but actually sent your anxieties off the scale. Fitz could not remember having a girlfriend who could *drive* before, let alone pilot a starship off planet. He had asked Carmodi as they had left the forecourt of the used spaceship dealership why they didn't just book a cabin on a commercial liner?

Carmodi grabbed his arm and led him quickly away, 'Don't worry your pretty little head about it, darling, this way we can go anywhere we please.'

Fitz had not argued. She was right. Carmodi was always right and anyway she was doing the neck thing again and that kind of did weird things to his vocal chords so it was probably not a good idea to speak at that moment.

The ship was a four seater with a tiny cabin surmounting a ridiculously large engine compartment. The engine squatted on the launch pad like an evil silver frog, its face contorted with malevolent thoughts. Fitz didn't think he'd ever been frightened by an engine before.

Carmodi finished the pre-flight checks and came back to help Fitz with the webbing. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and ruffled his hair. 'Don't worry, everything is going to be all right. As soon as we've got clearance we'll be away from this miserable place and on our way to get married. Do you want to wear white?'

Fitz giggled stupidly and reached up to kiss her lips. Carmodi pulled back with a snicker and Fitz frustratingly found he could not reach her now because he was securely held by the webbing. Carmodi blew him a kiss. 'Later. Let's get off planet first.'

Fitz couldn't help noticing that Carmodi was still holding on to the Book.

While she had been completing the checks she had held it against the side of her head and worked one-handed. As she helped him with the webbing, she 104

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had held the Book in the crook of her arm, and now as she took her place in the flight chair she placed the Book carefully behind her so that it was up against her spine. Out of the corner of his eye, Fitz saw her relax for a moment, close her eyes and flex her fingers in ecstasy.

Fitz opened his mouth to ask the question and then thought better of it. How could he get jealous about a book? How stupid would that be?

The frog engine croaked beneath them and ribbeted into life, shaking the cabin and causing Fitz to grab on to the webbing and clamp his mouth shut so that the whimper that was living in his throat couldn't escape through his teeth and get the hell off the ship.

Carmodi was sliding her fingers across the control surfaces and speaking in a low calm voice to space traffic control. Clearance had been given for departure.

*Odd, that.*

Why would clearance be given while IntroInductions' token-heavy, Gimcrack, was climbing across the transparent forward screen and was starting to bang on it with the butt of his gun?

Gimcrack was shouting something but Fitz could not hear what he was saying.

Carmodi had either not seen him, or did not care and was going to blast off the wharf with a smear of Gimcrack adhering to the windscreen. Fitz thought now would be the time to alert Carmodi to the fact that they had an extra passenger.

The crystal spires of the wharf began to slide down, with almost glacial slow-ness, behind Gimcrack.

No, check that.

The ship had begun to lift.

A flush of panic blossomed on Gimcrack's face.

'Er. . . Carmodi.'

‘He won’t be a problem in a moment.’

Gimcrack was turning his gun around and pointing it at the corner of the screen, holding the large black nozzle directly against the surface.

Fitz wished he could say something more helpful than, ‘Er. . . Carmodi.’

He watched with mounting panic as Gimcrack’s finger tightened on the trigger stud.

The screen went white.

Resonance Corridor

For such a large man Gimcrack sailed mostly elegantly through the air. The shock wave from his blaster set off the shield actuator in the ship’s defence grid. The force repelled him in a graceful arc to land with an appreciable thud in a heap at the feet of a used spaceship dealer who was screaming at the ship to stop because the credit transfer had been a false one.

Gimcrack shook his head and checked that he still had the right number of limbs and that they were in working order. He’d lost the gun somewhere during his flight through the air and so settled on just braining the dealer – who was now shouting about delayed credit transfer ghost programs and was getting right on his nerves. The dealer collapsed like a sack of broccoli and was silent.

Gimcrack looked up at the rapidly diminishing dot of the ship on which Carmodi and Kreiner were escaping.

Oh dear.

Darlow stepped over the unconscious body of the dealer and slapped Gimcrack across the face. ‘Don’t worry Darlow, I’ll stop them. Wait until they see me in their faces! You wait there Darlow, I’ll bring their sorry asses back to you in a minute. No problem, Darlow.’

Gimcrack flinched at Darlow’s wickedly accurate impression of his words just a few moments before climbing up the outside of the small ship across the engine mounting.

Darlow slapped him again for good measure. ‘If it wasn’t for the fact that we’ve got Kreiner’s friend Doctori, I don’t think I’d be keeping you on.’

Gimcrack nodded balefully.

The initial buffeting had subsided and the ship was now entering the sub-orbital phase of its flight. All that mattered to Fitz in the midst of the technobabble was that his eyes were not rattling in his skull anymore and the acceleration-against-gravity gradient was now at a point where he could breathe. Carmodi was leaning over the controls with an intense look on her face, the readouts reflecting in her eyes.

Her gorgeous, forever-deep eyes.

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Fitz was gripped by desire, a desire to hold Carmodi close, fill the contours of her body with his own and. . .

He wished these thoughts would come at a more appropriate time. *I'm trying to be scared here!*

Carmodi continued to work at the controls. She was doing something complicated to them and looked like she needed to concentrate hard. Periodically she would close her eyes as if she were listening to something very quiet, cocking her head to one side – almost as if she were communicating with the controls by thought alone. Fitz considered that this was not a good time to interrupt her. He had always thought of space flight as a complicated procedure, one that needed the maximum of concentration from anyone engaged in it.

Carmodi looked engaged – in more ways than one.

Fitz was nagged by a memory, one that slid and slithered in and out of his consciousness. It was a blue box, tall with a glowing light on top. He could not place the memory – but every time he thought about the dizzying mechanics of space flight, it would pop into his head. He had good feelings about the box; it felt almost to be part of him. The experience was both strange and frustrating.

Carmodi was engaged now in an ever more strained conversation about shore pass fees with Space Traffic Control, which they now were complaining about having been ‘ghost transactions’. Carmodi’s calm pilot voice was showing signs of fraying at the edges.

Fitz didn't know what 'ghost transactions' were but guessed that perhaps he didn't need to be as impressed about a woman who could buy her own spaceship any more.

Carmodi was refusing to return to the wharf.

Traffic control was talking about interceptors doing things like intercepting and stuff like shooting down.

Fitz tried staring out of the front screen to take his mind off things but that just caused him to begin a panic attack. There was a crack running the length of the screen, from the corner where Gimcrack had placed his gun.

'Er. . . Carmodi.'

'Not now, can't you see I'm busy?'

Getting to the wharf had, while they had been travelling, made things feel like they were moving forward. However, now she and Rhian had arrived by taxi and were wandering around the landing stage with no idea where to go next, things felt a little gelatinous in the moving-forward-quickly-department. Anji was also getting a little hacked off with Rhian, to be honest. If anyone had the Resonance Corridor

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right to be the one making the decisions around here, it ought to be Anji. She'd known the Doctor longest and was the one with the greater vested interest in getting him back than hoity-toity Little Miss Academic with the snob degree.

'*Economics?* Oh Anji, your parents must have been soooo disappointed. Who studies money any more?'

Anji didn't want to really go into the time-travelling bit or the actually my salary is about five billion times a year more than you've spent on your haircut *gingerfoureyyedumpygirl* thing. Two wrongs didn't make a right.

It wasn't usual for Anji to take an instant dislike to people. It usually took quite a few minutes – and how she hated herself sometimes for taking a dislike to people merely because of their first impression on her, but she found Rhian to be pompous, snobbish and bossy.

Coupled to the fact she was the dead spitting image of Velma out of

*Scooby-Doo* it made it very difficult for Anji to make a connection with her. Partially as she seemed to want to take the lead all of the time but mainly because Anji was shallow enough to admit to herself that she had always preferred Daphne.

Wind whipped across the landing stage, coming off the water in cold gusts.

Anji hugged herself tight and looked about disconsolately. Dawn was breaking on the horizon, under-lighting the heavy cloud that had moved in during the early hours. The wharf looked cold and imposing in the light of day, not at all like the blazing-spined crown it had been in darkness. The daylight gave it the shabby look of all the buildings on Lebenswelt.

*Definitely a town to be looked at during the hours of darkness.*

Boom after boom rattled Anji's eardrums as ships took off from the wharf, arcing into the sky and disappearing through the clouds, brief flashes from the engines lighting the vapour with an eerie glow.

Anji wiped her floppyscreen over a newsstand to get the latest news. The headlines were all about the mysterious power failures and about the bats making an unprecedented number of attacks on people during the night. The prison breakout had been relegated right down the list of stories, and of the Doctor and Rhian there was no mention. The authorities had far greater problems to occupy their minds.

It seemed the power breakages were coming in waves. There was no explanation offered and the Mayor and senior officials seemed to be kicking their heels and scratching their heads. Some scientist guys were talking about freak weather conditions and other scientists were laughing at them. It was chaos. It was a wonder that anyone was able to leave the spaceport at all. Anji watched as another pot-bellied ship leapt into the sky and cruised silently into 108

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the clouds.

Rhian reached over and turned off Anji's floppyscreen. Anji held it together rather well in the circumstances; she folded the dead screen into a neat square and replaced it in her pocket.

'I take it you'd like me to stop reading the news?'



Rhian, impervious to the ice in Anji's voice nodded. 'And we've wasted enough time.' Anji decided not to say anything about the time it had taken for them to find a fast food outlet so that Rhian could feed her face. Rhian had a dab of sauce on her chin. Anji wasn't going to tell her about it.

Anji asked, 'What exactly did he say?'

Rhian sighed in a way that Anji was sure was designed to upset her. 'He said he'd be at the space port. He didn't know why but the Book was on the move and that he had to get hold of it before it left Lebenswelt. Was that any different from the last twenty times I relayed it to you?'

'No – I just wanted to make sure. And it wasn't twenty, was it? Stop exag-gerating please. Right, it's quite obvious that –'

'That you've got to go to security system administration and ask them to look for the Doctor.'

'Oh, good plan – let's alert the authorities that their number one escaped prisoner is here on the wharf. That's not likely to produce any kind of reaction that might get us all arrested and thrown in the pokey, is it?'

Rhian looked crestfallen. 'I hadn't thought about that.'

*All hail the master criminal.*

Anji tried not to look too triumphant and failed. Colour rose on Rhian's cheeks and Anji could see that she was angry. *Come on Doctor, couldn't you have hooked up with someone a bit less wet?* Academics had always been stuffy stuck-up dusty old fogies to Anji, the kind that banged on their ceilings when you were partying in the flat above or wore cardigans in the summer. Rhian was doing nothing to change Anji's opinion on this subject.

'Well then, we'll have to search for them on foot,' Rhian said, trying to take command again. OK, so Anji had already come to that conclusion and was just about to suggest it anyway, but it did not stop her hackles from rising again.

Boy, would she give the Doctor an ear bashing when she saw him again. A prison full of potential and he had to send her Miss Bossy Boots.

'We'd better get started,' Anji said quickly before Rhian could beat her to that, too.

'Don't worry about the interceptors,' said Carmodi in a calmish voice that, of Resonance Corridor

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course, had Fitz worrying even more. He watched on the screen as two small dots approached from the planet below.

'Well, if the interceptors don't get us then the broken windscreen will.'

Carmodi looked at the crack in the main window and shook her head. 'The defence grid took care of most of that, just caught it off guard, that's all. The crack is minute and on the surface. We'll be fine.'

Fitz imagined he could see the crack snaking further across the transparent steel, imagined it bursting inwards and showering them with a mist of razor particles and bringing the cold kiss of space.

Sean Connery flying a jet pack suddenly popped into his mind. He shook his head. Where the hell did that come from? He really needed a holiday.

Somewhere like. . . like. . . Lebenswelt would do the trick, it was right up his. . .

Carmodi's skin was glowing with a fine sheen of perspiration as she manoeuvred the ship out of low orbit. Fitz tried to concentrate on what he had been thinking about before but the memories would not come back. All he could remember was the fact that he was deeply in love and that the woman of his dreams had asked him to marry her.

Interceptors? *Schmimperceptors*.

The dots were growing larger on the screen and the pilots were attempting to communicate with Carmodi but she was ignoring them. She was rocking backwards and forwards in her seat; head cocked again, eyes closed. Her right hand was behind her. Fitz could see that she was stroking the Book and her arm was trembling.

Fitz found a comforting dash of panic in the stew of his emotions and yanked it to the surface. 'Don't you want to keep your eyes on the screen? You wouldn't want to prang a sputnik or anything. . . '

‘Shhh. . . I’m listening.’ She placed a finger to her lips and then let it drop with a disinterested motion that made Fitz feel completely dismissed. OK, there was only so much he could take without. . . no, she was right. She needed to listen. She needed to concentrate. . .

Carmodi’s eyes snapped open and she straightened her neck. ‘Got it!’ she yelled and thumped the console with her balled fist, making Fitz jump at the ferocity of the movement.

‘What have you got?’

Carmodi turned to Fitz, a wide grin splitting her face wide. ‘The Resonance Corridor.’

‘I don’t understand.’

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‘I know,’ she said, and returned to the controls.

As interrogations went, Darlow was not having as much fun as he’d expected.

The man from Kreiner’s acid memory was responsive enough and seemed to be falling over himself to be helpful. It seemed that he wanted to find Kreiner as much as they did. Darlow hoped that he would get a chance to do some slapping around. It had been one of those days and seeing as everything had gone tits-up – he felt he was due a bit of slapping.

The Doctor, for that was his name, which he had given freely and without resort to unpleasantness, was tied to a chair among the flight cases. His shirt was open to the waist and there was a bruise blackening under his chin where Gimcrack had caught him with an upper cut. At least the big lunk had done something right today.

Svadhithana was standing behind with his fingers viciously-clawed into the Doctor’s curls. Every so often, he would yank back on the Doctor’s head and grab him under the chin. All the Doctor could do was to force out ‘Look there really is no need to be nasty,’ through squashed lips and immovable jaw.

Darlow gave the signal for Svadhithana to release the Doctor’s hair. Svadhithana thought it was the signal to twist the Doctor’s head

viciously round to snapping point. This time the Doctor couldn't get any words out and his face started to go blue and his eyes bulged. Darlow tried the signal again. Svadhisthana's face went blank and he shrugged his shoulders, not understanding.

Darlow composed himself and said as steadily as he could manage, 'Please let his head go now, Svadhisthana.'

'Oh, right.' Svadhisthana released the Doctor's head and stood back, practicing the signals to himself and realising where he had gone wrong.

'One thing that's not clear to me is how you knew I was with Fitz. . . oops sorry. Look, can I save you the trouble of saying, "I'm asking the questions"?'

Can we just take it as read that you *are*; get your questions out of the way and if we have time at the end, perhaps I could ask a couple? Sound fair? Sorry, technically that was a question, too. Do continue.'

Darlow was exasperated. He hadn't got where he was today, a criminal of high standing in the fraternal underbelly of galactic society, without having to break a few heads and send a few guys to the bottom of a gravity well in a plasticrete overcoat, but this character not only took the biscuit, he took the whole biscuit emporium along with him. *Didn't he realise who he was dealing with?* Darlow decided he would actually ask that very question – seeing as he'd Resonance Corridor

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been fishing around for a menacingly threatening line for quite a while now.

'Don't you know who you're dealing with?'

'Somebody Fitz owes money to, I shouldn't wonder. He can be a bit of a lad sometimes – you know youthful enthusiasm. I'm sure he'd be willing to recompense you for all you've lost.'

*You just couldn't shut the guy up.*

Darlow leaned over the Doctor, casting a deep shadow across his face. The Doctor smiled winningly. 'Thanks, that light was awfully bright.'

Darlow smoothed down the collar on the Doctor's shirt and wiped a

smut of dirt from his cheek. ‘You’ve been interrogated before, I take it?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Oh yes, and you’re scoring in the low five point twos at the moment. No offence.’

‘None taken.’

‘Excellent.’

‘But Gimcrack might take offence on my behalf – wouldn’t you, Gimcrack?’

Gimcrack peeled himself from the shadows between two large packing cases.

‘If you want me to, Mr Darlow, I’d be happy to take offence.’

The Doctor fixed Gimcrack with a light-hearted stare. ‘No need for that, Mr Gimcrack, I don’t think there’s a question I haven’t answered yet. Go on, Mr Darlow, ask me another.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘I honestly don’t remember. I woke up one day about a hundred or so years ago, pretty much as you see me now, except my clothes were a little less revealing.’

‘You expect me to believe that?’

‘I don’t expect anything of you, Mr Darlow, that way I won’t be disappointed.’

However, it is the truth. Please don’t hit me again; it won’t make the answers any easier. Believe me, Mr Darlow, I wish the truth were a little more convincing, but in the last couple of days I really have had some problems getting my message across. Perhaps it’s a translation convention. I’m not sure. Yesterday, the governor of the prison – he was utterly convinced that I was causing the curious EMP effect that seems to be attacking all of Lebenswelt’s systems. I held up my hands. “Not me, my friend.” Did he believe me? No, he didn’t.

Just ordered his underlings to execute me. I ask you, is that any way to run a socially cognisant prison system? I don’t think so. What do you think, Mr Svadhithana? Are those electrodes you’re attaching to my temples?’

Svadhithana had this time correctly understood Darlow's signal and had opened a small flight case during the Doctor's rambling monologue and pulled 112

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out the required piece of machinery. Legs ratcheted down from it and he stood it next to the Doctor, who eyed it suspiciously but continued to talk. It was only when Svadhithana had pulled the snaky electrodes from the back of the machine that the Doctor had passed any comment about it.

Svadhithana licked the surfaces of the electrodes and affixed them to the side of the Doctor's skull, pulling them from side to side to make sure they had adhered correctly. The Doctor winced.

'I hope this isn't going to hurt. Perhaps we could try a lie detector? I'm quite willing, you know. I'm sure there's no information that I have that would be of any use to you. I don't know who you are except for your names, which I can forget – I'm quite adept at forgetting, had lots of practice. If we could just come to some sort of –'

The Doctor's agonised scream cut across the room.

Darlow smiled. 'Easy Svadhithana – we don't want to burn him out completely yet.'

Anji's feet hurt and Rhian seemed to be able to go on without any rest whatsoever. How did that work? Dumpy, out of condition and yet seemingly with boundless energy.

They had searched many of the public areas of the wharf. They had even managed to get a look at some passenger manifests on the commercial flights by judicious use of a credit chip and Anji being an ever-so-lost-little-girl looking for her uncle-wunkle. The space-line stewardess had relented when Anji had started crying, blocking the boarding passengers. Luckily, Doctor John Smith didn't sound the kind of joke name that it did on Earth and – Anji hoped against hope that if the Doctor were on one of the ships he would have used it – the name had drawn a blank, as had the name Fitz Kreiner. Anji had tried the same trick at seven of the space liner check-ins before she had caught the attention of a securitybot. It headed her off at two other check-ins, asking her to accompany it to security control, where it was sure she could be assisted in her search.

Feigning seeing her imaginary uncle across the plaza, she had run

away from the persistent 'bot and met Rhian outside, where she was waiting with her dynamo legs.

Rhian was all for heading off again and searching public access ways and bars on the upper levels of the wharf. Anji held her back by the arm. Rhian's eyes widened and Anji let her hand drop.

'Yes?'

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'I don't think we're going about this systematically. We're just doing random searches. This place is huge and there are ships leaving all the time.'

'You think he's left? This great friend of yours? Think that he's abandoned you – is that it?'

Anji shook her head. 'No. We're not planning anything though, are we? If we split up then at least we could search twice the area. We could keep in touch by floppyscreen.'

Rhian considered this for a moment. She didn't look convinced. 'What if he's with those people who tried to kill you in the Rat's Kitchen? What chance would we have on our own?'

*Thanks a million; I'd quite successfully managed to get rid of that thought.*

'I don't really think we'd have that much of a chance – oh my God!'

Anji dived across the table between herself and Rhian, knocking the other woman to the ground. As Rhian squealed in protest, Anji covered Rhian's mouth with her hand and pushed hard, widening her eyes trying to convey

'Shut Up!' by sheer force of will alone. Rhian eventually got the message and relaxed beneath Anji. Anji stuck her head above the wall that they were now laying behind. Had she lost him? No. There he was.

CreepyEyedBloke.

She watched as he disappeared around a corner. Anji pulled Rhian to her feet and yanked her over the low wall.

‘Where are we going? What’s happening?’

Anji didn’t have time to stop and explain, she just pulled the other woman forward, dodging the people and ’bots that were milling around. ‘It’s one of them. CreepyEyedBloke. One of the guys who tried to kill me.’

‘Creepy. . . ’ Rhian anchored herself to the spot, stopping Anji dead in her tracks. ‘You want us to follow the man who tried to kill you? I don’t do suicide.’

Anji lost it big time. ‘Well, stay here then!’

This was the final straw, the first good lead they’d had since they arrived at the wharf and Rhian was showing a spine deficit. There was no time to argue.

Yes, it was dangerous, yes, it was a risk. Nevertheless, he still might lead her to Fitz and if she could save one of them today she wouldn’t think she’d done too bad a job. By the time she had gone through all the arguments in her head she had already crossed the plaza and was at the corner which CreepyEyedBloke had gone around. If Rhian wanted to stay behind, then fine. She squinted into the crowd but easily picked him up heading towards the warehouses that clustered around the merchant gantries.

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Of course. They’d been loading crates of stuff on to the loader when Anji had disturbed them yesterday.

Doh! Where else but a warehouse? Especially if they were waiting for a merchant flight off Lebenswelt. Anji jogged to close the gap between them and when she felt a safe enough distance behind to feel confident that she wouldn’t lose him, she settled into her most nonchalant *me? notfollowinganyonemate* saunter – pretending to read street signs and not walking into lampposts.

Rhian fell into step beside Anji. Her cheeks were puffing and her breathing was heavy. She was attempting to contain the signs she had been running and was trying to be as nonchalant as Anji.

‘Sorry. You’re right. It’s the best lead we’ve had.’



Anji said nothing but had to chase a rogue smile right off her face.

Fitz sat stunned in the webbing.

Carmodi had explained about the Unnoticed.

Carmodi had told him about the Resonance Corridor.

Carmodi had let him know what would probably happen and what their chances of survival were.

Fitz did not want to hear any more.

Snatching Defeat From the Jaws of

Victory

‘The Unnoticed are blanketing the entire system with a Wave Interrupter. Look, I know you’re doing the blank-faced open-mouth thing, but it will all become clear, I swear. As they approach, the disturbances from the Wave Interrupter will effectively destroy all methods of communication, stop generators from producing energy, even shut down electrons moving through wires, kill mi-crowave transmissions – everything. It is without doubt a terrific piece of kit.

Look, just try to abstract yourself from it for a few moments, Fitz – it’ll help, honest. This will stop the people on Lebenswelt letting anyone else know that they are about to be destroyed. The Unnoticed will be in and out, and will have done their job in a matter of hours. Yes, as I said, we have no defence against the Wave Interrupter. The field it generates is all encompassing, but there is a loophole in it, and that will stop us from dropping out of the sky and burning up in the atmosphere. Obviously, if the Unnoticed have to fly through the field then there must be a way in and a way out, yes? It’s a convoluted, impossible-to-navigate thread through the Interrupter field called a Resonance Corridor –

I’ve managed to lock on to it and as soon as the Unnoticed ship arrives in orbit, we’ll be able to fly straight out of the system. *Hopefully*. I will have to fly us very close to the Unnoticed ship as it comes in. Well, when I say close – there may be some, er. . . contact. Don’t worry about that because they’ll probably shoot us down anyway. Well, what I’m hoping for is that they’ll be so busy thinking about landing and trying to find the Book that we’ll be gone before they even notice. So we just wait here at the point where the Resonance Corridor will open. I’ll go into more detail about how I know all this later. Does that

help?

Fitz? Close your mouth, Fitz, I can see down your throat.'

Anji and Rhian watched as CreepyEyedBloke entered the warehouse. They were forced to press into a doorway as he turned to look around before pulling the door shut behind him. As the door slammed, Anji motioned Rhian forward and they jogged the final fifty metres over to the building. The streets had 115

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become gradually quieter with fewer people and 'bots moving about, but there was still enough activity or traffic to provide cover for Anji and Rhian. The warehouse lay in the shadow of a huge launching gantry against which a fat silver ship was resting like a tired whale. Anji could see a cloud of 'bots moving about high up on its side, taking in packing crates and cargo.

The warehouse door was solid and firmly locked by a pressure system. Anji gingerly pulled on the handle but there was no way it would budge. 'Let's look for windows,' she whispered to Rhian, who nodded.

They had to travel round three sides of the trapezoid structure before they found any windows. They were dusty and pretty much opaque. The windows all seemed to be as locked as the front door. Anji pressed her eye against the glass trying to see something, anything, inside. She could make out nothing except dark, looming shapes that might have been packing cases. She turned as Rhian tapped her on the shoulder. Rhian was pointing at a yellow roof access ladder that was located about twenty-metres away. Anji shrugged. 'Worth a try.'

Once on the roof of the warehouse Anji felt very exposed. The roof was a large, flat expanse, dotted with skylights, humming air conditioning units and access hatches at regular intervals. It would only take one nosy 'bot or someone up on the gantries to look down and see them and the game would be up. Anji and Rhian split up, each taking one half of the roof to look down into the skylights.

Anji checked four before she heard a muffled cry from Rhian. She looked up. Rhian was on the far side of the roof, flat against the surface as if she'd just thrown herself there. She was crawling to the nearest skylight and was peering down one corner, trying desperately not to cast a shadow. Anji jogged lightfootedly over and got down on

her hands and knees, as Rhian rolled out of the way. Anji edged closer to the skylight and twisted her head so that her left eye could hover over the glass. The skylight was dirty but with the rays of the morning sun breaking through the clouds she could see the illuminated square of light on the floor below. As her eyes adjusted she could see figures moving about. She immediately recognised CreepyEyedBloke and VomitBib – although he'd now changed out of the foul suit. She was directly above the huge square head of a blond colossus whom she did not recognise and in the centre of it all

– bruised, semi conscious and tied a chair – was the Doctor.

BlondColossus was feeding the Doctor some brown liquid from a flask that had been passed to him by CreepyEyedBloke. VomitBib was flexing his fingers and looking smug. The Doctor was trying to spit the liquid out but BlondColossus was helpfully holding his nose so that eventually he had no choice. As the Snatching Defeat From the Jaws of Victory 117

Doctor's head was forced back, Anji was sure she made fleeting eye contact with him. The Doctor smiled momentarily, runnels of dark liquid pouring from the sides of his mouth making his face look like an evil clown's mask.

Anji winked and rolled from the window. Rhian shot her a 'what now?' look.

There were three armed men down there, men not adverse to a bit of torture and shooting people up. Three men who had looked like they were in a hurry to leave Lebenswelt, the sort of guys who would stop at nothing to get their own way.

Here was Anji, a thin, slight futures trader two thousand years ahead of her time, in the company of a dumpy academic with a snobbery problem and a definite lack of guns.

*Hmm.* Didn't take a rocket scientist to work out the odds, did it?

Gimcrack stepped away from the Doctor, watching the coffee darkening the collar of his shirt. Darlow and Svadhisthana had finished their little session with him. Svadhisthana was removing the 'trodes from the Doctor's temples, leaving red marks. Darlow was leaning against a crate flicking through the flight options on his floppyscreen and the Doctor was wavering in and out of consciousness, the same lopsided grin that had been there for most of the unpleasantness moving tentatively across his lips. Gimcrack

thought about wiping the coffee that was spilling from the Doctor's mouth but he did not want to incur Darlow's wrath again today, at least. He was still smarting from losing Kreiner and the girl. Svadhisthana had hacked the shore manifest and destination coders for the little ship and had informed Darlow of their intended planetfall.

Darlow thought that it was likely that the destination codes had been as false as the credit chips and the ghost transactions. He charged Svadhisthana, who had returned with a ship brochure just a few moments before, with the task of looking at the specs for the ship and calculating the range and the likely destination.

Gimcrack wished that Darlow would ask him to do things like that – sums and things. He was fed up being the hired muscle. Darlow looked up from the floppyscreen. His face was thunderous. To no one in particular he said, 'Nothing for five days, even without the blackouts. We can't get priority bookings because of the. . . ah, liquidity problem with my account. Svadhisthana, when you've checked on the ship you'll have to hack us a place aboard a freighter going vaguely in their direction.'

Svadhisthana nodded as he continued to stow his machine back into its flight case.

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Gimcrack could have hacked them a place on a ship. He had watched Svadhisthana enough times. He contented himself with looking menacing in front of the Doctor so that he would be sure not to try anything. The Doctor was waking up now. The pain had etched lines across his face and he seemed somehow older now. His eyes were ever so slightly dulled, snot mingled with the sweat and coffee on his face.

Darlow looked down at the Doctor and then ordered Gimcrack to clean him up. As Gimcrack stepped forward, pulling out a grubby handkerchief from his suit pocket, the warehouse was rocked by an explosion. Gimcrack looked from Svadhisthana to Darlow and then back again.

The Doctor was whispering something just barely audible. Gimcrack held his ear close to the Doctor's mouth where the lips were working around two words.

‘The cavalry,’ he said.

Anji and Rhian watched from the roof as the securitybots and Waterguards entered the warehouse next door to the one on which they lay. It had been a simple matter floppyscreening an emergency call to the Waterguards telling them that the Book of the Still was to be ransomed for squillions of credits and then fling the floppyscreen over to the roof of the neighbouring warehouse and wait for the Waterguards to trace the signal. The Waterguards must have thought they were dealing with a bunch of incompetent morons. Of course, when they found the floppyscreen with the words ‘HOAX’ scrawled on it in red lippy, she hoped that they would be long gone.

As the first frame charge blew the warehouse door in, Rhian broke the skylight above the Doctor with the heel of her shoe, scattering the men below and showering the Doctor’s sweat-dampened hair with glittering particles. Anji stuck her head inside, found the catch and lifted the skylight on its hinges where it fell with a clatter. She stuck her head inside and, keeping her voice as steady and deep as she could, said, ‘OK, chaps, this is the situation. Half the wharf’s Waterguards are searching the warehouse next door. It would be the work of a moment to ask them to check you guys out in here, so to avoid the inevitable unpleasantness that would follow, why not release the Doctor, tell us where Fitz Kreiner is and we’ll call it quits. I reckon you’ve got about ten seconds to make up your mind before my friend up here starts screaming.’

She stared hard down at VomitBib’s incredulous face. BlondColossus moved to the window, looked out and turned back. ‘She’s right. The place is crawling with Waterguards and ’bots.’

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Anji chanced her arm. ‘Five seconds, gentlemen, she’s taking a deep breath.’

VomitBib nodded to CreepyEyedBloke who, with fumbling fingers, began untying the Doctor. The Doctor freed one hand and began doing up the buttons on his shirt with his expert watchmaker’s fingers.

*This isn’t time for modesty, Doctor!*

When he was completely free he stood up on unsteady legs and began to climb the nearest packing case. His fingers slipped and BlondColossus had to catch him as he fell back. The Doctor was pushed back into position and began to climb again. Anji caught hold

of his arm and helped him swing up on to the roof.

‘Where’s Fitz Kreiner?’ Anji asked, her eyes locking directly on to VomitBib’s.

VomitBib licked at his lips and raised a distasteful smile. ‘Off planet. Has been for the last two hours. Could be almost anywhere now.’

‘Don’t give me that. You’re bluffing – I can still attract the attention of the Waterguards if you want. I’m sure their customs and excise division would have a field day with whatever you were loading into the hover yesterday.’

‘He’s telling the truth.’

Anji swung to look at the Doctor.

‘Fitz has left the planet with somebody called Carmodi Litan. They stole a spaceship and have the Book of the Still. Now are we going to complete this rescue attempt or just wait here to be arrested?’

Fitz had found some composure cowering at the back of his mind and had pushed it trembling forward into the light of the crisis that was going on around him. The screen showed the two interceptors falling back to Lebenswelt, tumbling into the atmosphere, glowing briefly like the end of a cigar and then exploding. Fitz wondered when this was going to happen to them, or when they would collide with a ship that belonged to the Unnoticed or when his brain would just give up and leave home.

Carmodi sat nervously at the controls, all sense of connection between her and Fitz broken. She alternated between staring at the crack in the screen, the black gulf of space ahead, and closing her eyes to listen. This was the longest time they had not spoken since Fitz had known her – he couldn’t exactly remember how long that had been, but it must have been *ages* because you didn’t feel like this about someone after only one night, did you?

The smidgeon of composure was allowing him some objectivity in the situation. It wasn’t a lot of objectivity, but it was enough to keep his screaming, paranoid subjectivity in check – well, for the moment at least. On the plus side, 120

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Carmodi had been right about everything so far, had managed to get

them off planet in a ship that had not befallen the same fate as the interceptors and whose screen, although damaged, seemed to be holding out magnificently.

OK, so they were entering a whole new phase of the game now, but he had no reason to believe that Carmodi wouldn't get him through this in one piece.

*Hey!* said Fitz's composure, *this isn't so bad after all.*

The screen was filled by the Unnoticed's ship and Carmodi was screaming for him to hold tight and brace for impact.

The ship shimmered into existence, burrowing through the shell of Wave Interruption like a huge iron arrowhead. The surface of the ship was a coral field of frozen iron and crystal – it sparkled cruelly in the weak light of the sun. Twisted shapes and arching structures covered the visible shell seeming to make no concessions to symmetry. A cluster of scabrous extrusions, that might have been stumpy residual limbs or crew decks, grew from the main body of the ship at irregular intervals. The whole ship looked like a roasted salamander, spinning on its axis and falling towards Lebenswelt.

A shock in the Wave Interruption bubbled the vacuum behind the ship and it was towards this disturbance that the much smaller ship was heading. Its engines glowed and it skimmed the surface of the much larger ship like a remora looking for a good place to land. It came so close and fast beneath the prow of the ship that bursts of debris were blown into the space around it by the gust of particles from its engine. It screeched beneath one arch of black knobbly coral and was out again, low and fast – a small silver fish hiding in the shadow of one much larger. A twist this way, then that, and it was up over the coal-black bow and crashing into the disturbance.

Turbulence took hold of it then and tossed it away from the larger ship, sucking it into the maw of the Wave Interruption and the never-ending artery of the Resonance Corridor.

The black coral ship began to slow and prepare for planetfall. Of the other ship there was no sign.

Darlow had never envisaged when he had embarked on a life of crime that he would one day be hiding from the Waterguards in a sewer pipe, up to his chest in effluent while Gimcrack held a hand over his nose and Svadhisthana tried to make no sound as he retched in the darkness. The heaving of Svadhisthana's retching was sending waves

in the foul liquid lapping almost to his chin.

This was not what he'd envisaged at all.

## Snatching Defeat From the Jaws of Victory 121

It was obvious that the Waterguards would search the warehouse where they had been holding the Doctor. The calculated risk had been whether or not they could have got to their prepared bolt hole before the girl drew attention to them. Releasing the Doctor had given them the necessary time to pack all their gear back into the innocuous crates and get down into the pipes below the warehouse.

When Gimcrack had located the pipes on the system and suggested they use them in the event of a situation he had assured Darlow that they were storm drains; that the only thing they'd find down there would be water and perhaps a few rats. But, true to their current streak of luck, when they opened the hatch the stench that greeted them had been that of a sewer. With nowhere else to go they had had to splash down into the darkness.

Gimcrack had started to apologise about the fact that the wharf blueprints he had acquired had been mislabelled. Darlow had just kept hitting him until he had shut up.

Darlow listened now to the whirr of the Bots above and the voices of the Waterguards as they searched the warehouse.

There was nothing now to do except wait in the stinking darkness until it was clear for them to come back into the warehouse and try to find some more clothes.

Nothing, that is, except to fantasise about revenge.

By the time they reached the park where the TARDIS had landed, the Doctor was all but unconscious from exhaustion and the exertion of resisting Darlow's interrogation. He was supported between Rhian and Anji, mumbling to himself.

Rhian caught snatches of words like 'Fitz' and 'Carmodi'. As he spoke their names, his fingers would claw into Rhian's thigh; it was as much as she could do to wrench them free from her flesh. The Doctor had firmed again at one point and they laid him down in the shadow of some bushes until he was able to move on again. Rhian had questioned the wisdom of leaving the wharf and not getting straight after Fitz and Carmodi.



Anji said that the Doctor would recover faster in the TARDIS.

‘I assume “TARDIS” to be the Doctor’s blue box time machine? Probably some awful linguistic short-form like “Time Acronym, Really Dreary – Important Sounding”.’

Rhian was having problems with Anji. It was obvious that the other woman did not care for her at all. She’d made that perfectly clear since they had met in the hotel room. Rhian thought that she’d made some progress with the Doctor’s 122

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companion as they’d followed CreepyEyedBloke back to the warehouse. Now Anji was reunited with the Doctor, things had become decidedly frosty again –

especially after Rhian had made the crack about the TARDIS.

Another power failure bumped the taxi heavily to the ground and cut all the systems. Anji had to give up her credit chip as surety against the fare before the angry taxi driver had allowed them to carry the Doctor away.

Now they had arrived at the blue box. It was taller than Rhian had imagined but was still going to be a tight squeeze for them. ‘Normally I don’t have anything to do with time machines, you understand. I find them an unnecessary distraction.’

Anji put the key in the lock and opened the door.

‘Oh, you’ll find this one very distracting.’

Before they could enter, however, the sky was torn asunder, and a shockwave threw them all off their feet.

The inrush of air that followed the massive thunderclap toppled the blue box towards them. It was as much as they could do to roll out of the way as the TARDIS landed with a crash, on its doors.

## Bad Guys Wear Black Hats

The ship hung above the city, soot falling like black snow from its surface.

Steam vented menacingly, scattering the clouds of bats that had come to investigate.

Lebensweltians and off-worlders were flocking from their homes and hotels to see the huge ship. The sky was darkening towards night and the lack of light pollution from the city allowed the population to pick out the encrusted detail on the burnt and blackened underside of the ship – it glistened in places as if it had been grown; in other sections the ship resembled the inside of an oven that had never been cleaned. The smell from the soot and the venting had the tang of overdone carbon about it.

The ship was of no recognisable design, not that they could check the design against any in the city databanks, seeing as the city databanks had shut down with everything else. The Mayor's office wanted to send sentinels up to investigate the ship, but of course, none of those were working either.

As the Lebensweltians looked up at the ship that was fading into the darkness, many of them wondered if the responsibility for the power outages rested with the curious new visitor. Be a bit of a coincidence if it didn't, many others answered.

The rest of the population, mostly off-world tourists it had to be said, had lost the plot somewhat, and, with no sentinels or armed police to keep them in order, had gone on a rampage.

The ship hung silently above the chaos, fires from burning buildings reflecting dully off the underside of its hull.

Night fell.

In the morning, the ship was still there, like a blood-black scab over a wound in the sky.

'I've never seen anything like it.' The Doctor looked up at the belly of the ship, squinting to make out more detail in the early morning light. 'But that doesn't say much; I haven't really seen that many star ships in the last hundred years.'

If we could get into the TARDIS perhaps we could find a book to look it up in.'

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Anji looked down at her broken and torn fingernails and let out a depressed sigh, thinking again about the fruitless hour they had spent again trying to roll the TARDIS over to expose the doors. 'Haven't you ever thought of putting a fire escape in this thing?'

'Never really needed one,' the Doctor said, leaning against the TARDIS and wiping the sweat from his forehead. 'But I'll seriously consider putting one in at a later date.'

The Doctor had recovered well after a night sleeping in the shadow of the TARDIS. He seemed to draw strength from just being near its comforting hum and familiar shape. Anji hadn't slept at all. Every time she'd tried to sleep, all that she could think about was the ship that hung above them and the cloying aroma of burnt things that was emanating from it. The Doctor had been far too tired to consider the ship last night, but now as dawn had risen and Rhian had returned from the city with tales of panic and riots, he was much more interested.

Rhian had gone to try to get food and something to drink. She had returned empty-handed, too afraid to go alone into the city proper with the crowds of rioters still rampaging through the streets, burning and looting.

'Well you could have looted us something to drink,' said Anji unhelpfully. The Doctor had admonished her gently and led them into the city to get a better look at the ship.

Anji did not appreciate being admonished at the best of times and certainly not in front of *Velma*, so she lagged silently behind as Rhian and the Doctor talked about various forms of temporal homeostasis. How could they be discussing academic rubbish like that when Fitz had been stolen?!

The Doctor had relayed as much as he could about the activities of Darlow, Svadhisthana and Gimcrack (Anji definitely preferred her names for them) and the business that they were involved in. Fitz had got himself into some no-brainer situations in the past but this one was the King, Queen, Jack and Ace.

This was *theeeeeeee* royal flush. What could he have been thinking? An *escort* agency. . . no wait, she knew exactly what he'd been thinking. So that Fitz could get his jollies, he'd put them all at risk and Anji had been shot at.

Lots.

And now they had to find a way off Lebenswelt and find Fitz, who had been stolen by his client. Anji envisioned a fair amount of shooting to come and plenty of it was going to be in her direction.

The Doctor and Rhian had finished their cultural and spiritual exploration of the nature of natural time travel and were now discussing the ship. Anji had Bad Guys Wear Black Hats

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no reason to feel excluded now, because on this subject they were equal: they all knew nothing.

The Doctor was sucking at his fingers and then seemed to be counting bits that were hanging off the ship. Rhian was just staring. Anji imagined that Rhian was trying to find something dismissive to say about it, like the way she had pompously dismissed the TARDIS. Perhaps this ship was going to try and fall on her, too.

‘Is it hostile?’ said Anji; her innards curling at the shlock SF phraseology that she had just come out with. Dave would have had a postmodern field day, popping at her for that one.

The Doctor was shaking his head again. ‘It *looks* hostile. I mean, if you were trying to make an impression, one that would put people off from giving you the benefit of the doubt, you wouldn’t turn up in a ship that looked even remotely like that. I think it’s been designed for the sole purpose of causing disquiet. And it’s worked. Hence the looting and the panic.’

They could hear the chants of crowds in the near distance. Even the eerie silence that had accompanied the power and communication breakdowns had been preferable to this.

Their route had taken them to the foot of the observation platform – the one off which the Doctor had tried to teach himself flying on the morning of their arrival. ‘Shall we take a closer look?’ the Doctor suggested, heading towards the rickety spiral staircase that ran alongside the now defunct lift.

‘You’ve got to be joking!’ Anji blurted before she could get a handle on her sensibilities.

‘No. Where better to get a look than from an *observation tower*? If you want to wait here. . . ?’

Anji thought about waiting around on her own rather too near to a rampaging mob of rioters. ‘All right, but let me go first so you can catch me if I fall.’

‘What about me?’ asked Rhian with a tremble in her voice.

Anji looked back over her shoulder. ‘You can catch me as well, if you like.’

Fitz awoke first and for a few moments couldn’t remember exactly where he was. Then when he realised he was still alive and that he hadn’t been shot, depressurised, or wiped out in any of the dozen or so ways he’d thought of, he allowed himself a wild grin and removed himself from the webbing in the seat.

Carmodi was face down at the controls, a widening puddle of goo dripping from her mouth, eyelids flickering. Fitz pulled her back and wiped at her mouth 126

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with his sleeve. She coughed, opened her eyes, and smiled as she saw him.

‘You OK?’

Carmodi nodded. She seemed just as surprised and happy that she had survived. ‘That’s not the kind of manoeuvre you expect to get away with twice in one lifetime.’

Fitz was incredulous. ‘You’ve done that before?’

‘Just the once. And at much greater cost. Don’t ask about it. I don’t like to talk about it. And count yourself lucky that I mention it even now. So, have you found the food dispenser yet? You could dial up some breakfast while I set the course.’

Carmodi was pointing at a machine at the back of the cabin. It was about the size of the Baby Belling that Fitz used to have in his flat. . . flat. . .

*White out. Headache.*

He thumped back down into his seat, holding his temples. Carmodi came immediately to his side, pressing her cool palm across his forehead.

Fitz focused on the feel of her skin against his. Something real, something that he could cope with. A bridge of reality across the opening chasm of uncertainty that was dropping away beneath him.

Oh, God.

The headache was slicing through his temples. Cheese-grater pain.

Carmodi held Fitz close, burying his face in her hair.

He felt part of her again and the chasm closed with a rushing of dark sound.

Like the negative of white noise. There was a seepage and flow. An osmosis and a surge in the currents of his body.

The headache was gone.

The transaction was over.

The observation platform had taken nearly three quarters of an hour to climb, the three of them twisting up through the giddy ironwork. All Anji could do was keep looking ahead and holding on to the rails until her hands hurt, sliding them over the rough, rusted metal, snagging the sleeves of her top on the Frankenstein bolts that held the structure together. When they finally got out on to the viewing area she was exhausted, not from the climb but from the knee-shaking vertigo that had accumulated on the journey up.

Anji didn't usually have a problem with heights, but the issue didn't usually keep thudding into her frame of reference like this one did. The spiral staircase had obviously just been there for decoration. No one was supposed to climb something as rickety as this, for fun!

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The Doctor was out of breath, too. Perhaps he hadn't been ready for such exertions. He leaned against Rhian as she came out behind him, resting his hand on her shoulders and putting his forehead against hers.

Anji could not help noticing how uncomfortable Rhian looked.

The platform was covered in a fine layer of soot. When the Doctor had caught his breath he knelt amongst it and picked some up in his

palms. The flakes were thin and papery. There seemed to be little substance to them and they littered easily from his hands as the breeze caught them. There was an oily brown residue left behind on the Doctor's hands, which he sniffed at. 'Carbon mainly, roasted metals, some exotic particles. A crust that has built up around the ship.

It has obviously been in some kind of hostile environment, or its means of travel build up extraordinarily high temperatures.'

Anji was steadying herself against a rail and all she could really think about was how difficult the downward trip was going to be. Up close, the stench from the ship was overpowering and nauseating. Anji had to put her hand over her mouth to cut out the coarse fragrance. The Doctor was unperturbed; he stood hands on hips now, marvelling at the blackened underbelly of the ship. Rhian was mirroring him.

Anji dared a look up and was pleasantly surprised to find that her sudden and unwelcome bout of vertigo was subsiding and she was able to stop trembling and relax her grip on the rail.

There were no signs of visible openings in the ship. The jet black encrustations had no lines or seals running between them – the surface was one huge expanse of bubbles and scabs.

A flying cremation.

There was a commotion behind the Doctor and Rhian. Anji looked away from the ship to see that some locals were fighting their way to the top of the spiral staircase. They were dressed in official-looking robes and one was holding a seal of office in his hands. Anji recognised him as the Mayor, a deeply unpleasant politician who had done a lot of oily wheedling from her floppyscreen as the crisis had deepened. He was followed on to the platform by a phalanx of guards who had swapped their blasters for batons. The guards were obviously not very comfortable with the idea of coming so close to the ship without the backup of some hefty firepower; they looked terribly nervous and were staring with awestruck horror at the ship. The Mayor was pushed forward to the head of the group. He was handed a tin megaphone, which he pointed shakily at the ship.

The Mayor obviously wasn't used to communicating in such a manner and was missing his floppyscreen. He put the thick end of the

megaphone over his mouth and began to speak. The Doctor, who had sidled over in that *I-can't-resist-a-good-nose-about* way of his, tapped the Mayor on the shoulder and suggested, 'Turn the megaphone around.' The Mayor, who was obviously terrified, complied.

The guards moved menacingly towards the Doctor and he held up his hands in contrition. 'Sorry, I just hate to watch people attempt to break the laws of physics,' he said with a smile.

The Mayor, now quite clearly looking for a reason not to try to make contact with the ship asked, 'Who are you?'

'Just an interested observer.'

One of the better informed of the officials behind whispered in the Mayor's ear.

'You're an escaped prisoner! Guards! Arrest that man!'

Happy to start doing something they were experienced in, like arresting someone and doing a bit of roughing up, the guards did just that. The Doctor did not resist and within seconds was surrounded by guards and on his knees in front of the Mayor with a necklace of batons holding him still.

The Mayor was also finding comfort in something that was within his frame of reference and thought he'd start by asking the Doctor some questions. 'You managed to break into the museum with technology unknown to us, and believe me we know a lot about technology. Then the prison just opens its doors and lets you all out, coincidentally while you were being interrogated -'

'Executed, actually.'

'What?'

'I was about to be executed. Illegally.'

'That's beside the point.'

'No it isn't. The governor of your prison was going to execute me because the lights were going out. Not even the worst electrician in the galaxy deserved that!'

'Nevertheless, these power interruptions and communication breakdowns have increased exponentially while you've been free. And



now this ship arrives, and who do we find trying to communicate with it? *You*. We should throw you off this platform right now.'

Anji's heart flipped in her chest and then completed a triple-axel for good measure. The guards looked quite happy to throw the Doctor over the edge without even waiting for a direct order. Anji had stepped forward to raise an Bad Guys Wear Black Hats

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objection to that particular course of action when the Doctor said loudly, 'Fine, throw me off the platform, die horribly and without any notion why. See if I care.'

The guards paused for a moment and the Doctor looked expectantly at the Mayor.

'What do you mean?'

'Ah, so we've got your mind to follow suit with the megaphone and turn the right way around, have we? Good. Can I stand up, please?'

The Mayor nodded and the Doctor got up, brushing down his clothes.

'Explain yourself!' the Mayor bellowed.

The Doctor pointed behind everyone. All heads turned.

Anji gasped. Two guards dropped their batons and ran for the stairs.

A triangle of three-metre-high beings in black trenchcoats had materialised on the far side of the platform.

They held heavy, silver, gaping-barrelled weapons in their writhing, tentacled, hands.

Beneath cavernous hats which completely covered their faces in shadow, white lips moved strangely. A voice that hissed just on the edges of audibility emanated from within the lead alien. 'Still. Book. Book of Still. Give now.

Die quick.'

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One guard was half-heartedly holding on to the Doctor's shoulder, the others having reluctantly followed their leaders towards the towering

alien figures.

The Doctor brushed the hand easily aside and walked backwards to whisper to Anji. 'I want you to slip away – get to the TARDIS. See if you can't persuade someone to help you turn it over. I suspect we might need to leave in a hurry.'

Anji opened her mouth to protest but the Doctor placed a finger on her lips.

'I really don't know how this is going to go – I'm betting badly, if the Mayor's ambassadorial skills are what I believe them to be.' He placed a firm hand on her head, turned her around and gave her a small shove in the back. 'Go now!'

Anji dropped her gaze, nodding, and began to edge for the spiral stair, taking deep breaths and wondering if she could make it to the bottom without opening her eyes. Obviously, what the Doctor wanted made sense, but she couldn't help feeling the Doctor's refusal to listen to her protests and his reaction to them were a smidge overbearing. She could put a positive spin on it by telling herself that the Doctor trusted her to complete the mission alone; however, seeing as she'd only just found him, it was frustrating to be separated from him again.

The stairwell loomed ahead of her; she could see down the spiral all the way to the ground. The stairs looked even more flimsy now. Pushing her heart back down her throat, Anji stepped forward and began to descend.

Rhian watched as Anji disappeared below the level of the platform. She had not been able to hear what the Doctor had said to her but could see that he had been determined to make his point. Anji had certainly left with her tail between her legs. Although now, Rhian was annoyed that the Doctor was more interested in the tall people from the roasted spaceship than getting on with finding the Book.

She had hoped that their trip into the city would be to have a quick look at the ship and thence on to secure the Book. Now that the Mayor and his officials were otherwise preoccupied, they had a fine opportunity to *all* slip away and get on with it!

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The Doctor had moved forward and was shouldering his way through the guards, who had no inclination to stop him. Rhian followed in his wake until she joined him in the semi-circle of Lebensweltians, who were as near to the massive aliens as they dared. Up close, the new arrivals were even more imposing. Their faces were still in full shadow beneath the brims of their hats.

The trenchcoats reached fully to the floor and were made of a black leathery substance that seemed almost rigid, were it not for the folds which hung down their lengths. Multi-suckered tentacles waved and slithered over the surface of the guns now trained on the Lebensweltians and the Doctor with menacingly deliberate movements. She could hear breathing from the depths of the coats, huge breaths that squealed like chains swinging in a slow wind.

Rhian suddenly felt like a very small pawn on a very large chessboard.

The foremost alien hissed another sentence over the hushed crowd. 'Book Still. Now. Pain negotiable. Save your people unnecessary suffering. Book.

Now.'

'To avoid disappointment?' said the Doctor brightly. 'Hello, I'm the Doctor.

The chaps who can't seem to find their voices are the Lebensweltian government – the, ah. . . ' He looked at the Mayor. 'Mayor?'

The Mayor nodded, but still couldn't find his voice.

'The Mayor,' the Doctor continued, 'and these are his Ministers. The chaps with batons are the guards and this is Rhian – she's a non-linear anthropologist, by the way. Who are you?'

The foremost alien's quivering lips clamped shut.

Where the two sides of its coat met were huge rubbery buttons. Rhian watched as thin white fingers slipped out between the flaps and unhooked the buttons. A bony arm, cruelly emaciated, followed the fingers. The upper arm was covered in sores which left dots of pus on the surface of the coat.

Squeezing out of the widening flap was an alabaster body; humanoid in shape, but so painfully thin that it made Rhian wince. A bald, wrinkled human head topped the body. A head that held eyes with

huge black pupils. The figure, now fully exposed, had female attributes from which all the femininity had been removed. Where the skin was not stretched thin and broken over bone points it hung in wrinkled pouches.

The naked human began sniffing the air, edging forward on crooked legs and distorted feet from which toenails grew like yellow curled wood shavings. She continued to sniff in a feral manner, shoulders twisting and hands held out like antennae. She approached the Mayor, who leaned back as far as he could from the suppurating form, a look of distaste etched on his face. The figure moved 132

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on to Rhian, who felt herself gagging as she ran her eyes over the skin on its back; tumours had erupted there like islands in a ghostly sea. The tumours looked raw and painful.

The figure passed on.

It sniffed at the Doctor now, his face a mask of compassion. Rhian thought she could see a tear sparkling in the corner of his eye as he surveyed the twisted form before him. His bottom lip trembled involuntarily. Rhian saw him taking a deep breath and bunching his hands into ever-tighter fists.

A cry that startled the onlookers and had the guards diving for cover keened from her lips as her nose met the Doctor's chest. The cry was of ragged fear coloured by agony. She looked about fearfully as if expecting death to fall on her from the sky at that very moment and then, in a flurry of scuttling, she was bounding back to the safety of the coat. Within a second, her fingers were disappearing inside, refastening the buttons.

The guards got to their feet, brushing themselves down, trying to appear nonchalant.

The foremost alien took a step quickly back, almost bumping into its companions, who were also forced to step back. All three guns were now pointing at the Doctor.

'Time traveller!' The hiss was pitched high. 'Not move. Die now.' The Doctor raised his hands.

Rhian held her breath, and then screamed.

All three guns fired.

If it wasn't so horrible it would be comical. In fact, Rhian had seen old-time Earth archive vids that had used the very same joke. An explosion goes off and when the smoke cleared all that was left would be a pair of boots, burnt and blackened, with smoke curling from their insides.

*Oh, funny, haha!*

Except here and now there were two sets of smoking boots. And these boots still had the feet in them – ragged and charred stumps of legs sticking out of the tops. Rhian was only just returning to a standing position and was uncomfortably close to the unpleasant aftermath caused by the aliens discharging their weapons.

*The Doctor had raised his hands.*

Two guards, seizing the opportunity to attack, had rushed forward from the ranks to try to surprise the aliens while they were preoccupied with the Doctor.

*Rhian had held her breath and then screamed.*

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The aliens turned in unison from the Doctor and fired. The guards hadn't stood a chance.

Everyone except the Doctor had thrown themselves to the floor as the guards were disintegrated, their bodies smeared on the wind, sprays of blood fanning out behind the smoking boots.

The Doctor kept his hands raised and spoke. There was a grim authority in his voice that Rhian could not have imagined being there before. 'I want everyone to get up very slowly. Our visitors are willing to kill us if they are given cause. Gentlemen of the City Guard, you saw what happened to your comrades.

Do not think that you would be treated any differently if you were also to act so rashly.' The Doctor licked at his lips. Rhian could see the calculations going on behind his eyes, the weighing of risk, as if his face were alive with possibilities and the paramount need to keep everyone around him alive. He spared no glance at the evidence of the dead guards; his concern was only with the living.

This savage act of violence had pushed him to another level; Rhian had seen it before at the crashed hoverbus. A determination that was absolute in its ferocity.

The Doctor turned back to the aliens. 'We mean you no harm. I apologise for the actions of the guards; they acted without authority from their leaders and without thought. We understand your need to protect yourselves when threatened and hold no malice towards you for the actions you were forced into.'

The Mayor fixed the Doctor with a wide-eyed stare, his mouth a hollow 'O'.

When he received no glance of acquiescence from the Doctor, he turned to the aliens and nodded his agreement.

'You all die. Whatever. Only you choose method. Quick, clean. Drawn, dirty.

Choose. Still. Book. Now.'

The Doctor essayed the idea of lowering his hands but as the guns twitched towards him, he repositioned them high above his head.

'You time traveller. Smell it. Cannot interact. Die too. Cannot leave here.'

'Can you at least tell us why you're here? What have these people done to you? Why do you wish to destroy them?'

'No matter. Explanation irrelevant. Send bomb.'

A white marble ball, featureless and half a metre in diameter materialised in front of the alien. Rhian caught a movement in the flap of its garment and a flash from two dark liquid eyes as they shrunk back, blinking, into the darkness.

The ball hummed gently. Rhian couldn't hear it, but she could feel it. There was a sick bass hum resonating through her innards.

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The foremost alien let its left bunch of tentacles drop from the side of its gun and fall into the ball. Its surface was liquid, like milk, and the tentacles dipped in without resistance, swirling the surface tension of the ball.

'Book. Still. Clean? Dirty?'

'The Book has left Lebenswelt.'

The tentacles froze in the ball, stiffening at the Doctor's words. With a slithering, whipping motion, they flicked out of the ball and reached inside the alien's trenchcoat. The tentacles were withdrawn and entangled in them suddenly was the naked female. She kicked and struggled but could make no sound as there was a tentacle wrapped around her throat.

The Doctor made as if to rush forward, then checked himself. His mouth was so tightly closed that Rhian could see his lips turning to white under the pressure. He was making a supreme effort of will to not intervene, not get himself killed unnecessarily.

The alien waved the pathetic woman about, swinging her, this way

and that, almost dashing her head against the metal rails on the edge of the platform.

Eventually she was brought to rest and the tentacle around her throat was relaxed. She breathed in a huge breath. It rattled in her throat like loose cogs.

‘Feel! Locate!’

The female in the tentacles moved her head about, freeing her arms and holding them up to the sky. After a few moments, a look of abject fear ran over her features. She nodded and pointed high above the head of the alien.

‘We go.’

The alien tossed the woman over the edge of the platform, where she screamed for some seconds before she was out of earshot.

The aliens disappeared.

The ball continued to hum with dark menace.

Eventually, Anji reached the bottom of the platform.

She did not, under any circumstances, ever, whatever the need or whatever the emergency, want to ever, ever, EVER do that again. She looked up at the slender iron tower, mentally waved her fist at it, and then was slightly perturbed to find that she was really doing it. She pulled her arm quickly down to her side and walked away whistling.

First things, first. How was she going to get anyone to help with turning over the TARDIS? She fully expected the population of Lebenswelt to be preoccupied with either looting or staring awestruck at the roasted spaceship.

But perhaps not all of them.

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Anji felt like Baldrick – she had a cunning plan.

Anji led the mob into the park.

She ran at the head of the crowd, swinging her arms and screaming



Native American war chants that Dave had taught her when he'd been auditioning for a particularly crap advert that, although crap, had bought them a new DVD

player.

Anji was enjoying her new role as an *agent provocateur*. The Doctor would have been proud of her, she thought as she ran, whooping again and swinging her arms in the opposite direction. She'd had to modify the dance, which should have been carried out on the spot, into a running jumping thing, and so she was also congratulating herself on her sense of improvisation.

She had easily found the nearest group of looters and had joined in their rampage, throwing chairs through windows and generally having a destructive time. She didn't like to admit to herself how liberating it felt to be joining in such blatant law-breaking, so she rationally set it against the need to have the TARDIS righted.

Whenever she'd watched the anti-capitalist rioters in the streets below her office or seen the Kyoto protestors battering down the doors to the White House and getting rubber-bulleted and CS gassed, she'd imagined that mobs were uncontrollable things that went where the mood took them, that they were directionless and leaderless. But what turned a directionless mob into one with a purpose?

The mob had been born in fear. Fear from the unknown ship, fear from the unknown power breakdowns. The kind of fear that brought people on to the street and made them feel that they needed some free gear to make the fear go away.

*Uh-uh.*

So she knew she wasn't dealing with an unshakable political belief about the effects of capitalism or greenhouse gas emissions. This mob had no purpose.

She would have to give it one.

Shouting at the top of her voice that the aliens had landed in the park and were starting to do weird alieny things which really should be stopped before it was too late, had, in truth, taken a long time to get enough off-world rioters worried sufficiently for them to stop collecting floppyscreens and jewellery. But in time Anji had herself a breakaway *mobette* of her own, running through the street towards the park, all determined to kick some alien arse and get them to turn their

newly stolen deluxe floppyscreens back on.

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## The Book of the Still

‘Where are they?’

Anji brought the crowd to a halt around the TARDIS. ‘In there!’ she shouted, pointing at the Doctor’s time machine and doing the Native American thing again. Quite a few of the mob had learned the dance and the chant – and were getting good at it, too. ‘They’re in there! I saw them going in! They took my Dad!’

Anji wondered if she was laying it on a bit thick, but the mob seemed happy to go along with her. ‘Help me turn it over. There are doors underneath!’

Many hands pushed against the side of the TARDIS. ‘Filthy aliens!’ someone was shouting along with the war chants. The TARDIS began to move; it lifted clear of the ground, and Anji and others in the mob got their fingers underneath. Now, with greater purchase, the TARDIS was soon up on one corner.

‘Keep clear!’ Anji shouted and the TARDIS toppled back like a huge blue die.

Such was the momentum the crowd had achieved, with a huge roar it went on to one side and then flipped up so that the doors were facing the sky.

Anji knew that she had to move quickly. She lifted herself on to the top side of the TARDIS, feet astride the frosted glass windows. ‘Dad! Dad! Don’t worry, I’m coming!’

The crowd roared with approval as Anji began to hammer on the door with her fist. Only the closest could see that she had a key in her hand. Praying that her aim would be good, she lunged for the lock and yelled with triumph as the key slid into place.

The doors collapsed beneath Anji and suddenly she was falling feet first across the console room.

And heading in direct, unstoppable motion towards the glass tubing of the central column.

The ship turned on its axis quickly and smoothly.

The scarred and blackened area that could be described as the nose pitched up and the ship roared away from the city, carving the air into a vacuum and riding a thunder clap into the high distance.

The Doctor threw himself across Rhian as the ship moved away, anchoring them to the platform by wedging his legs between two rail posts. Now he rolled off Rhian and leapt up, needing to hold on to the rails for balance as the platform rocked on the shockwave. Like a captain walking across the deck of a bucking yacht, the Doctor made his way to the featureless white ball, which was able, through some confluence of technology, to remain steady on the platform without the lateral motion of the tower affecting it in any way.

Mob Dynamics

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Rhian had to look away from the crazy perspective of the tower rocking around the white ball. It hurt her sensibilities.

The Doctor had reached it now and was feeling around it with his hands.

He pushed against it, but it wouldn't budge. He pulled at it – still no effect.

The hum was rising in pitch now as the tower settled down to a gentle swaying motion. The Doctor made some calculations on his fingers, turned and sat against the ball, his face aghast.

He beat at his forehead with the heels of his hands, got up and kicked the ball.

The Mayor approached, but the Doctor paid him no heed. He was trying to calm himself down by taking deep breaths, clenching and unclenching his fists.

‘What is it?’ asked the Mayor, pointing at the ball.

The Doctor lowered his eyes and spoke very quietly. ‘Death,’ he said simply.

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There were bits of her that hurt when she moved and there were bits

of her that hurt when she was still. There were other bits that hurt in the anticipation of moving and bits that hurt when they thought that her body was about to *stop* moving.

The TARDIS's gravity had caught Anji before she'd hit the central column that meshed into the console, which had been a bonus. Unfortunately it had dropped her two metres on to the console. Brass, copper and knobbly bits of wood did not make the most comfortable of landing surfaces.

Anji was fairly sure she hadn't broken anything – well, at least not broken anything that stopped her from limping around the console rubbing her kidneys. She pulled up a stool so that she could sit at the console and watch the mob outside get bored, then, in dribs and drabs, wander away. The crowd spent an hour or so banging on the outside, demanding that the aliens release Anji and her father (!) – and then, when the well-done to burnt ship had upped and left, shooting up through the atmosphere like a steak she'd once returned aerodynamically to the kitchen of the worst plastic-rustic restaurant in the universe, the mob decided that the crisis was over and they had better get back home before they were arrested.

Anji was glad to find that the TARDIS had not been badly affected by the power outages. A few concealed lights near the doors had blinked out as she had fallen past, but as she'd operated the door control, the lights flickered back on and the background hum that she was beginning to find strangely comforting had returned to something akin to its normal pitch. Lights and dials on the console which she'd never noticed before were blinking and spinning in a way that suggested that the TARDIS was fighting gamely against whatever the aliens were using to disrupt power and communication on Lebenswelt.

When the last of the rioters had gone, Anji got slowly off the stool and decided that really she should go back to see how the Doctor was getting on. She felt that she was moving a little better now, and, after taking a few paracetamol, she opened the door to the TARDIS. As she got to the doorway, the TARDIS's gravity relinquished its hold on her and she climbed out on to the lip of the 138

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doorway, painfully swung her legs over, and jumped down. The TARDIS door swung back into place, which must have been a security

measure for when it was laying on its back.

Anji struck off back towards the observation platform.

The smell hit her first – just before Gimcrack’s fist.

Rhian realised that the Doctor thought that the Mayor wasn’t getting it *at all*.

The guards were holding the Doctor by the arms, his face was flushed and his eyes were on the featureless white ball. Rhian could almost taste his anxiety at being kept from it. Once the ship had flown off, the Mayor had recovered most of his composure and wanted to do a bit of shouting and taking charge. He had indicated to his guards to take the Doctor away from the ball and he was now going to get ‘some answers’. The Doctor had to be lifted bodily from his position hunched over the ball, his fingers trembling over the surface, looking for an access panel of any kind. Now he was trying to make his point to the Mayor, and things were getting fraught.

‘It’s a bomb! I know it doesn’t look like a bomb. Perhaps it would help if it was ticking! Shall I make tick-tock noises for you?’ The Doctor was close to pulling out his hair.

‘How can you be so sure?’

‘When our tentacled hat and coat said, “Send Bomb”, it appeared at his feet.

Pretty conclusive, don’t you think? He also said, “your people will die”, not just, “you”, meaning us. “*Your people*.” Perhaps we can infer from that that it’s going to kill everything on the planet.’

‘One bomb couldn’t do that.’

‘These creatures have the ability to turn off every electrical impulse and communication on your world! A bomb that set off a fusion reaction in your atmosphere would be the work of an instant! If we don’t find a way to defuse the bomb, we’re all going to die. Are you up to speed now?’

The Mayor’s face became a complicated arrangement of anger, despair, and fear.

‘You really think so?’

‘Yes. Now can I get on?’

The Mayor nodded and stepped back from the ball. ‘Where do you think would be a safe distance?’

‘How far is the next habitable planet?’

‘Antimasque?’

Er. . . ’

One of the Mayor’s officials whispered in his ear.

‘Umm. . . seventeen light standard.’

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‘That should do it.’ The Doctor turned back to the ball. ‘Now, you guards, help me get these floorboards up.’

The Mayor’s face had gone almost completely white.

With much straining, grunting and Mayoral pacing, the guards helped the Doctor raise the floorboards around the bomb so that he could get access to the underside. Rhian had to step back from the dizzying gulf left by the removed floorboards across which the Doctor lay face up on a plank, counterbalanced by guards.

The bomb stubbornly hung in the air once the floorboards were removed from under it. It would not move, shift or spin – it was as if it were welded to the air.

Updrafts of wind were blowing the Doctor’s hair into his eyes and he had to keep brushing the curls back. At one point his shirt blew up over his head and he had to use both hands to tuck it back into his trousers, causing Rhian to feel giddy and hold on to the rail for support.

The Doctor completed his examination of the underside of the bomb and slowly inched his way back along the plank, where he was helped to his feet by the guards. He approached the Mayor, his face grim.

The Mayor could not wait for the Doctor to speak. ‘Well?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I can’t get into it. There may be some

workings deep inside, but I don't think even if I had tools I would be able to access them.

It's some sort of wet-stasis generator. It takes the air and fuses it into a solid mass. It'll be on a timer or remote control; once it receives the signal it'll –'

'Doctor!'

Rhian was the only one still looking at the bomb, and she had noticed that there was a change occurring in it.

The Doctor turned to see where Rhian was pointing. The surface of the ball was swirling with waves of blue energy, a zebra pattern fluctuating with ever-increasing intensity. Rhian thought how beautiful it looked as the mesmerising patterned flowed and then, with panicky realisation, felt that admiring its aesthetics might not be appropriate at this time.

Coming to, she looked about for the Doctor. With full-on raging horror she saw that he was vaulting the rail, launching himself off the platform.

The waking up from unconsciousness thing was getting to be a habit that Anji did not want to cultivate. Being around the foul-smelling psycho horror escort agency from hell was another. As her blurred vision returned to normal she could see Darlow, Svadhisthana and Gimcrack swimming into focus. She didn't Danger: Unexploded Planet

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want to think about what was covering their clothes. She didn't want to but she had no choice. The smell was enough to see to that.

'I wouldn't want to pay your dry cleaning bill.'

Darlow was in a wheelchair; he was wheeling himself up and down.

Pacing with his hands.

The stench in the small hot room was overpowering and the more Anji became conscious and alert, the more she wished her nose would shut up shop and bugger off, thank you very much.

Anji realised that she was tied to a chair in much the same way that the Doctor had been in the warehouse. Tight bands, holding her wrists

to the tops of the legs, ankles lashed at uncomfortable angles.

OK, she had to ask. ‘Had an accident?’

Darlow squeaked to a halt, and twisted to face her. ‘A very long time ago.

The power failures cause me, ah, difficulties with my prosthetics.’

‘What a shame you don’t also wear a pacemaker.’

Gimcrack moved uneasily from foot to foot.

Darlow smiled a smile that was more like a leer and wheeled himself closer.

Anji focused on his eyes, mainly to ensure she didn’t have to look at the stains on his suit. Darlow nodded with approval, completely misreading Anji’s stare as defiance. ‘You really think you’ll be a tough nut to crack, my dear?’

‘I have been tied up by people who smell a lot better than you, you know.’

‘Crack the nut.’

Svadhithana moved forward, out of the shadows.

*Focus on his glasses. Focus on his face. Anything.*

Don’t look at the syringe.

The Doctor was kicking at the machinery above the elevator car. His arm was looped through a support strut and his back lay across the skylight.

Rhian had fully expected him to see him falling to his death, a small white speck heading for the ground, a fatal snowflake. Her heart had almost become a vibration in her chest, fearing that the Doctor, faced with the imminent explosion of the bomb, had seen the futility of his attempts to defuse it and had decided to take his own life rather than face the terrors that would be unleashed.

To see that he had swung around under the platform and had landed on the roof of the elevator had almost stopped her heart in its tracks. He was now kicking at the machinery with precise aggression, ignoring the shockwaves that 142



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were travelling stiffly up his leg. His knuckles were white where he clung grimly to the stanchions.

Rhian moved back from the edge and approached the hole in the platform made by the removed floorboards, leaning down so she could get a better view of the Doctor.

His face was set with determination. With a grunt of triumph, the wheel that he was kicking came loose from the hawser that ran through it and the elevator began to drop down the open shaft. Rhian's heart somersaulted several times in her chest.

The Doctor pushed the wheel back into position and the elevator slowed.

The wheel was part of the braking system.

*He'd been experimenting to see if he could operate the brakes manually!* Rhian thought. *What if he'd been wrong?*

The Doctor hooked his foot around the brake housing and pulled the assembly back. The elevator dropped with ever-increasing speed. Rhian craned her neck to see down the shaft but the Doctor had disappeared from view. She returned to the rail and looked over, seeing the last third of the shaft as the elevator dropped, the Doctor pushing with his foot to slow it down. Within seconds he was at the bottom of the observation tower, was leaping down from the elevator and pelting off through the streets.

Surely he couldn't be leaving them all to die?

Carmodi was hugging Fitz again. Her arms wrapped around his torso, her legs wrapped around his legs as if trying to get the maximum amount of her body in contact with his.

Don't get me wrong. . .

If there had been anything like *that* going on, Fitz would have been 'yer man'. But this, like the four other times since they'd got on the ship, was totally, utterly and frustratingly platonic.

Four times during the hours since the manoeuvre that had saved them from the Unnoticed ( *whoever they were*) Carmodi had silently got up from the controls, kissed him, slid down on to his lap in the chair and

tried to slither inside his skin.

She's so close. I love her. This is wond-

*Don't get me wrong.*

Sometimes it felt like the most glorious, loving and intimate cuddle he had ever experienced, and then there were the times it felt like this. Cold, selfish and –

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*Don't get me wrong.*

Fitz shook his head. What was he thinking? This was glorious. How could it be anything else?

The colours on the surface of the bomb were growing in intensity. The projected patterned images were slithering across the surfaces of the platform, reflecting in the eyes of the guards, discolouring the skin of the Mayor and his entourage.

Several guards had been sent in pursuit of the Doctor but had only just reached the foot of the stairs.

The Mayor, in a fit of ultimate self-denial, had announced to the gathered guards and officials that the 'so-called bomb' had 'obviously' been an 'obvious ruse' and that 'obviously the Doctor was obviously in league with aliens' and

'obviously that was why he had escaped'.

Rhian remarked that it was now obvious why politicians needed to employ speech writers.

The Mayor rounded angrily on Rhian, accusing her of being the Doctor's accomplice. (Taking no account of the fact she'd been on Lebenswelt for three months, was an accredited academic, and that her attempt to steal the Book had in no way mirrored the Doctor's much more spectacular attempt, 'obviously'.) An accomplice who had now been callously abandoned after the Doctor had set up the 'obvious diversion'.

Rhian reminded the Mayor that the aliens had appeared to be terrified of the Doctor. Why would that be, if they were in league with him?

The Mayor's eyes had glazed over in the way that all politicians' eyes glaze over when you say something that doesn't fit snugly with their world view. Then he ordered that Rhian be 'held for further investigation.'

Like there was anywhere to run. . .

Two guards had moved close to Rhian to make sure she did not make any attempts to leap over the railing and learn how to fly before she hit the ground.

*Huh!*

The bomb was now flashing and pulsating, crackles of energy moving across it like errant hair in a strong wind. Rhian was becoming more anxious. She had no reason to believe that the Doctor had not told the truth about the bomb and its probable effects on Lebenswelt. Would an alien race commit genocide, just to get their hands on the Book of the Still? Rhian knew how desperate she was to see it but could she kill for it? Kill for the information it contained?

The Mayor had ordered the floorboards to be replaced around the bomb so that his guards could get close to it en masse and beat it with their batons.

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*That* seemed to be a good way to treat a bomb.

Rhian called to the Mayor, asking what the scientific rationale would be for hitting a bomb with lengths of carbon fibre? Was he hoping to beat it into submission and get it to agree not to explode?

The Mayor ignored Rhian and ordered his guards to redouble their efforts.

Rhian held herself close and shivered. This really wasn't how it was all supposed to end. There hadn't been any contingencies for this. She wished that she could be a little bit more upset about the imminent cessation of her life, but the situation had come about so quickly and seemed to be heading towards a resolution so fast that she really hadn't had time to get annoyed about it.

Maybe if she stamped her feet about a bit. . .

The guards were now taking steps back from the bomb and the Mayor was screaming at them not to stop, but crackles of energy were firing off its surface in stinging branches. One guard was nursing a savage burn on his arm and batons clattered to the floor as the guards stepped back. The ball's surface was rippling blue, and jagged waves were crisscrossing its surface, clattering into each other with blinding flashes. Rhian tried to step back from the ball but found that the railing was at her back. She couldn't get any further away.

The light thrown out by the ball was now too bright to look at. Rhian could feel heat emanating from it as she turned to look out over the burning city.

Columns of smoke were rising from many areas below. Buildings burned. She could see crowds of people flocking the streets, smashing windows, setting new fires, fighting each other over the rights to looted goods. On the horizon the wharf was ringed by a circlet of smoke.

A high pitched whine was now coming from behind Rhian. It started just on the fringes of annoying but quickly moved on to unbearable. Above it, she could hear the voice of the Mayor half-heartedly bleating orders that seemed to be about retreating and getting back to a safe distance. The whine continued to increase in intensity; it started to judder on the air. Rhian could feel it interfacing with her eardrums, causing them to vibrate painfully in her head. Stuffing her fingers in her ears didn't seem to help. In fact, it seemed to intensify it.

So this was it. This was the end. The whine had the unbearable feeling of moving towards a climax. She was sure that it didn't actually have any bearings on the workings of the bomb. She felt that it had just been put there so *you knew* things were moving to the point of dissolution, moving to the moment of your death.

She felt that she could get quite angry about the cruelty of that idea.

And then the light and the whine cut off abruptly.

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Ah, the last wicked pause before the explosion.

*Goodbye, Daddy.*

Clenching her fists and trying to unscrew her eyes, Rhian turned to face her death, determined not to be removed from existence whilst cowering in the opposite direction. If she was going to die she was going to die head-on and defiant.

When the explosion came, it was a rather unimpressive affair, actually. Rhian even felt rather disappointed that the end was going to be such a damp squib. . .

*How come I'm still alive to make these observations?*

Rhian opened her eyes and was astonished to see the Doctor's TARDIS standing foursquare on the platform, exactly where the bomb had been. The sides of the blue box seemed bowed somehow, out of kilter with the intended symmetry. Panels that made up the sides were out of sync with their neighbours and a rich crimson light was spilling from the cracks between them. Rhian flinched as the lamp on top of the box fizzed and exploded, throwing out slivers of glass within a cloud of particles. That's gonna leave a mark.

A thin wisp of smoke rose gently from the shattered lamp. It was caught by the stiff breeze and quickly dissipated. As Rhian watched, the bowed edges and the out-of-kilter panels gradually returned to normal and the crimson light faded.

Rhian took a step forward, then another, and then another, and then. . . she was running towards the box. She reached it and hammered against the wood.

The heel of her hand was immediately blistered by intense heat – but she ignored the pain and kept on hammering. 'Doctor! Doctor!'

The TARDIS door swung open on a gust of black smoke – almost as if the box itself was breathing a sigh of relief. Rhian stepped back, unable to breathe for a moment, and had to wipe smuts of soot from her eyes. Through the smoke, a figure emerged, smoke rising around him, face blackened, shirt ripped, shoes melted.

The Doctor fell forward into Rhian's arms.

Contact High

'Look, this is all very nice and everything, and I know enough about the concept of being a *new man* to understand how important cuddles *are*, but do you think, possibly, we could perhaps think about, er. . . moving on to, if not first base, at least base minus one?'

She was asleep. The sound of her gentle snoring rose across his chest in a tickling vibration. It had taken Fitz twenty minutes to pluck up the courage to bring up the subject of hanky-panky and when he had finally amassed enough sections of spine to open his mouth, Carmodi was already travelling into the Land of Nod.

Fitz sighed and tried to get more comfortable in the crash couch, but Carmodi was laying across him in such a way that he was unable to shift more than an inch and his elbows were held painfully in place by the weight of her body.

*She's beautiful. . .*

Will you give it a rest with that!

Fitz shook his head. Yes, she was beautiful, and he was crazily, madly in love with her, but it seemed that every time he tried to think about anything even remotely on the edges of doubt, his mind would do a double back flip and. . .

*Sleeping like a baby. When will we have children. . . ?*

Hold it right there!

Carmodi jumped and was suddenly awake. 'Did you say something?'

'Not exactly.' Fitz managed to extricate one of his arms and push Carmodi to one side so that he could free the other. She uncoiled her arms from around his shoulders and fixed him with a puzzled stare.

'Are you all right?'

Fitz felt colour rising into his cheeks. He hadn't felt this guilty since he'd been caught peeing in the Headmaster's aspidistra (just before entering the military academy in seventeenth-century Prussia) because of a bet with 'Smelly' Palmer.

'Yes. No. I don't know. This is weird.'

'It was your decisiveness that first drew me towards you, you know.'

Fitz squeezed out a half smile but he could tell that Carmodi didn't believe it. She sat up in his lap and the movement against him was a totally agreeable 146

Contact High

one. Carmodi rolled her eyes. ‘Oh that! I should have realised. There’ll be plenty of time for that once we reach Antimasque.’

Fitz hated being so transparent. He’d have loved to be a wonderfully cool sophisticate with impeccable manners. . . you can take the boy out of Norrrrf Laaanden, but you couldn’t take the Norrrrf Laaanden out of the boy. . .

‘It’s not just that. . .’

Carmodi raised an unconvinced eyebrow.

‘OK, that’s a large part of it – but – you can’t keep away from me; every moment when you’re not at the controls, you’re either sniffing that book or coiled around me like an anaconda. And you’re. . . sniffing me. I can hear you.

I know you’re trying to hide it and make it feel like kisses, but I know what you’re really doing. I’m having the same effect on you as the Book, aren’t I?’

It was Carmodi’s turn for colour to rise in her cheeks. She slid from Fitz’s lap and backed to the console, where the Book rested against the controls.

Carmodi picked it up and held it to her chest. Fitz stood, too, and took a step towards her, hands outstretched.

‘It’s OK, it doesn’t freak me out. It just seems that there’s more to this relationship than I can get my head around. I love you. Truly, I do, but I just keep getting the sense you’re getting more out of it than I am – that you’re not only in it for me, for who I am.’

Carmodi snorted and staccato laugh. ‘It’s *exactly* because of who you are!’

Fitz’s face twisted in a moment of confusion. This was the first time that Carmodi had been anything other than blissed out in his company. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘I thought the memory acids would last a bit longer than this without the desequencing antidote – but those bastards were obviously using diluted stock.

I knew I should have gone for the gold card option.'

'At the risk of repeating myself. . . '

Carmodi sighed, holding the Book up to her mouth. Fitz could see her breath condensing over the surface, a darker patch across the leather, quickly dried by the harsh lights of the cockpit.

'Well, you had to find out sooner or later. Fitz, you're a time traveller. And. . . '

She paused, not for dramatic effect, but, as Fitz could see, because the words caught like barbs in her throat, as if they were the worst things she could possibly have to say. Her face was darkened by a thousand painful memories.

' . . . I am addicted to time travellers.'

That was seventeen days ago.

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## The Book of the Still

The Doctor moaned fitfully in his sleep. The screaming had stopped, which was good. But he still looked dreadfully pale and sickly, which quite frankly, wasn't.

Rhian had heard the noises through the adjoining door and had entered the Doctor's sumptuous cabin, concern ploughing deep furrows across her forehead. The Doctor certainly could have done with more rest before taking on an arduous One-Light journey to Antimasque. Every hyperspace-engined ship on Lebenswelt was grounded until complete safety checks had been completed.

The Lebensweltians did not know the effect that the aliens' technology had had on the delicate engines, so the old One-Lighters had been brought back into service. The ship that they were now on was still three days out from Antimasque. The Doctor was recovering slowly from the shock of wrapping his TARDIS around the bomb as it exploded. Rhian still didn't understand how transdimensional mechanics had conspired to save Lebenswelt, but at least the Doctor was alive. He had assured her that the TARDIS would repair itself in time, but they couldn't wait for that. The Mayor had been so grateful to the Doctor for saving Lebenswelt that he had allowed him privileged access to the flight plans for all the ships that had off



planeted during the crisis – just a few hours after it had been found that the Book of the Still had been stolen.

Reviewing the security tapes in the Mayor's office, the Doctor's eyes had widened as he watched Fitz and his female companion nonchalantly stealing a spaceship. This ship had then turned out to be the only ship that had taken off during the last power outage. It seemed obvious to the Doctor, even in his weakened state, that if the Book had left Lebenswelt, this was the ship that it would be on, and that Fitz had stolen it. The Mayoral sniffers had located a fair amount of Anji's DNA signature at the wharf; so the Doctor had surmised that, seeing as now Anji was missing from Lebenswelt, there was a fair chance that she'd been spirited away also. All he couldn't do was explain *why*. He had asked for passage on the next ship out to Antimasque, the only planet within range of the rogue ship. The Mayor was happy to arrange the flight on the proviso that 'that bloody Book never comes anywhere near Lebenswelt again!'

Climbing the wharf gantry on to the aging starliner had all but exhausted the Doctor, and he had leaned heavily on Rhian's shoulder, his breath coming in short painful bursts. Since then he had hardly left his cabin. He preferred to have meals brought to him, and to eat them in bed. Soon the colour had returned to his cheeks and his humour had surfaced.

Rhian called on him a few times a day. She tried to broach the subject of what had happened while he was held captive by Darlow and the psycho-escort-agency from-hell, but he would either become vague and change the subject or Contact High

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more usually angry and defensive. Rhian got the impression that he was doing all he could *not* to remember what they had done to him.

But although the Doctor's general health was improving during the day, it was in the midnight hours that Rhian could see that not all was as it should be.

Sometimes he would moan gently in his sleep, just enough to wake Rhian in the cabin next door, and some nights there would be yells followed by incoherent ramblings. Tonight, screams of terror.

The Doctor lay twisted up in the covers, the pillows askew – one pyjamaed leg stuck out from the bed at right angles to his body, his left arm carved circles in the air above him and his hair adhered to his

forehead in sweat-slick strands.

Rhian leaned over the Doctor and wiped his forehead with her handkerchief.

His arm stopped its insane dervish and lay still at his side. He did not wake.

His lips trembled with words whose meanings Rhian could not even guess. She bent closer to his mouth. She strained, trying to slow her heartbeat, which was thumping in her ears, so that she could conjure up enough silence to perceive what the Doctor was saying. She leaned closer. . .

The Doctor exploded from the bed with a yell of terror. His arms wrapped around Rhian and they spun on to the plushly carpeted floor with a dull thud.

The Doctor's hands were at her throat in a second and he yelled at her to stay still or he would *snap her bitch neck like a Mondroolian River Reed*.

'It's me! It's me!' she managed to gasp as his fingers slid tighter around her throat.

The Doctor opened his eyes and, with a look of shock, released Rhian's neck.

He jumped back on to the bed as if stung and landed cross-legged on the mattress, breathing heavily. 'I'm sorry,' he croaked. 'I. . .

I. . .

there's. . .

no.

Nothing. Sorry.'

Rhian got shakily to her feet. 'I heard you screaming. I came to see if you were all right.'

The Doctor nodded and wiped the damp hair from his forehead, then leaned back on his hands, blinking quickly. 'I was having a dream. A nightmare. The Book of the Still was in there somewhere. I don't know where. I was terrified that everything would unravel and that I would be powerless to prevent it. And then I was strangling. . . I don't know.

Someone. Female I think.'

'I usually just have dreams about being naked behind a lectern in front of my class.'

The Doctor stopped blinking. 'Oh, you have those too? I thought it was just me.' The dazzling smile cut through the worry lines around his mouth and suddenly Rhian felt a lot better. The pain in the skin around her neck was 150

The Book of the Still

banished almost immediately and her heartbeat returned to some semblance of normality. The Doctor patted the end of the bed, indicating to Rhian to join him.

Rhian felt herself blushing. It had taken fair amount of courage for her to even enter the Doctor's room, let alone join him on the bed. Of all the situations she had been exposed to over the last few days, this was the one that she was the least prepared for.

The Doctor smiled at her awkwardness. 'It's all right; I have nothing but honourable intentions. I thought you looked uncomfortable standing up. It's not every day that someone tries to strangle you.'

Rhian mentally kicked herself for misreading the signals. She wasn't very good at relationships; well, at least that's what she said when explaining to herself why she hadn't had any yet. She gingerly placed one buttock on the edge of the mattress and tried not to look too embarrassed. The Doctor pushed himself back up the bed and rested on the padded headboard, blowing away a swan feather that was tickling his nose.

He hugged a huge pillow close to his chest and yanked the corners of his mouth down until they almost met underneath his chin. 'Now, I'm not one for nightmares. I'm not really one for sleeping, but I've fairly had the stuffing knocked out of me recently. If I hadn't made it to the Minus Room before the bomb exploded I certainly wouldn't be here now to complain about nightmares.'

'Minus Room?'

'Null interface space. Abstract of reality. A lens of unreality around which reality is bent. It refracts real time and space and allows you not to be affected by what is going on around you. Nifty if you're exploding world killer bombs within a transdimensional environment.'

‘Very useful.’

‘Yes and the TARDIS only made one for me that morning, bless her cotton socks. Do you think she knows more about what’s going on than we do?’

Fitz wasn’t sure if he wanted to be found.

Beneath the broad leafed tree, its bark hard against his back, he rested his forehead against his knees and tried to remember everything that he had forgotten. Carmodi had told him that he had had a whole life before this one –

a life that had included time travelling (natch), of which he had no recollection. Everything kept coming back to swordfighting, big shirts and a worrying propensity for slapping his thigh when things seemed to be going well.

Contact High

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Carmodi found him anyway.

Fitz looked up as he heard her footsteps approaching.

‘That’s close enough.’

‘One quick hug. Go on. I’ll do the neck thing.’

Fitz shook his head. ‘No thanks.’

Saying no twisted his guts into tight knots. He wanted her. Wanted her so close that he could taste the pain like an acrid bile at the back of his throat.

Keeping away from Carmodi since they had made planetfall on Antimasque had been almost unbearable. A constant battle between heart and mind. He loved her so much. But he didn’t know why.

Fitz began making up a rollie. The Antimasquan tobacconist had looked at Fitz strangely when he’d asked for ‘something lilke Old Holborn’ (the only proprietary name he could remember) and had eventually handed over a sachet of pungent brown tobacco and a box of pink, sticky cigarette papers – the whack on his forged credit chip had caused Fitz to look shiftily around the shop feeling guilty.

‘Why are you doing that?’

‘I need a fag.’

‘You don’t smoke!’

‘I don’t know that. I might.’

‘It’s bad for you.’

The rollie crumbled between his trembling fingers and he had to start again from scratch.

‘This isn’t the time for an anti-smoking lecture.’

‘Addiction is dangerous. Terminally. I should know.’

Fitz looked up, catching her eyes for the first time.

‘At some point in my life, the details are unimportant, I became addicted to time travellers.’

‘How do you become addicted to a person?’

‘As you travel through time, all manner of exotic particles accrue in your system.’ She sucked in a shivery breath, as though tasting the words. ‘Bockatrons, Harminum, Artron Oxidants. . . I get a. . . contact high. . . ’ Carmodi’s eyes flickered and she regained her composure. ‘I had a skill once, a skill that produced this dependency as a side effect. I didn’t want it. I didn’t seek it out. It wasn’t an illicit liaison with a time traveller in the Rat’s Kettle that got me hooked. It was beyond my control. It happened through no fault of my own.’

Her eyes fell.

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Fitz observed Carmodi suspiciously. He felt a tinge of guilt. She seemed genuine, but. . .

‘Unfortunately most travellers find my attentions. . .

*difficult* to handle.

When I followed you to IntroInductions and realised I could have your

memories altered so that you would never leave me – never he repulsed by my needs

– it seemed too good an opportunity to miss.’

‘You *bought* me?’

‘Rented you.’

‘And then you stole me?’

Carmodi nodded.

Fitz felt tears stinging in the corner of his eyes. ‘I love you,’ he spat bitterly.

‘I cannot bear to be apart from you. And now I find out that these feelings are drug induced. That you paid to have them implanted. That *you* had my memories wiped and only want me so that you can leech gear from my “system”

until I’m like a used-up tea bag.’ The tears were flowing freely now. Carmodi reached out, but Fitz pushed her hand away. ‘And the worst thing is this is a love that I can’t turn off. I hate myself for saying these things. I hate myself for doubting you. I’ve been programmed to feel that this is all *my* fault –

programmed to forgive you anything. I’m fighting my own mind for control over my emotions. Can you imagine how that is making me feel?’

Carmodi nodded but did not answer.

Fitz looked out over the grasslands to where the buildings of Antimasque began like a thousand Versailles mounted on the roofs of two-thousand Hampton Court Palaces. Airships scudded across the sky, swinging golden gondolas.

Biplanes crisscrossed the clouds, looping the loop.

Fitz screwed up the unlit rollie and threw it to the ground. He got up and held out his hand to Carmodi.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s dance.’

Bollywood or Bust

*Sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha!*  
*Sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha!*

The stampede of satyrs would normally have brought a raised eyebrow or three from the groundsmen, but they were too busy running from the triumvirate of trenchcoated horrors who had just floated from the trees, brushing thick branches easily out of the way with *klakking* lobster claws. The groundsmen stumbled to a shuddering halt as the satyr herd turned to smoking ruins. They turned as a man to face the aliens and were very soon a pile of crisp charcoal themselves.

The aliens floated gently to the ground and landed in a perfect triangle.

The foremost alien reached inside the folds of its trenchcoat and pulled out a pale humanoid, waving the thin body in the general direction of what could be considered the main habitation. The humanoid keened and wailed as the sharp serrations of the keratinous claws barked against her skin, drawing blood.

When the foremost alien was satisfied, it quickly stuffed the human back into the fold of thick material. Silently, the triumvirate took off and headed into town.

*Sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha !*  
*(Clap!)*

*(Clap!)* *Sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha lakka lakka lakka sha !*

*(Clap! Clap!) Halle! Halle!*

The Doctor plucked the torn corner of his floppyscreen from the hotel register routing node and tried to look nonchalant. Not easy in the foyer of *this* hotel; he was up against serious competition. If Antimasque was any more laid back, being vertical would have been an imprisonable offence. Rhian felt self-consciously uncomfortable at the Doctor's blatant hacking of the hotel register with a lashed-up floppyscreen and two pipe cleaners he'd found in an ashtray.

*Of course* she wanted to find the Book. She wouldn't have come this far if she hadn't. The uncomfortable feeling was obviously a pang of residual normality which she was sure would, after a few more juicy crimes, certainly disappear.

The Doctor's reply to her perfectly reasonable question of why, seeing as they had been given a full pardon on Lebenswelt, they still had to get involved in 153

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criminal activities like this had, on the surface, made sense. 'We don't want to draw attention to our presence. Any legitimate traffic is bound to be monitored by our trenchcoated friends. Don't forget they flew from Lebenswelt a good two days before we did and, judging by how things around me usually pan out, I'd say there is a good chance they're here too. And as we know, the aliens will stop at nothing to get their. . . er. . . hands on the Book. The less we involve the authorities the better.'

But when she dug around underneath the answer, the bit about these characters being here *already* and the chance that she still might die in the screaming maelstrom of planetary dissolution didn't do anything, *quite frankly*, for her feelings.

The Doctor called up a map on his floppyscreen and thumbed the menu floating over the hotel. 'That's them.'

Rhian narrowed her eyes and looked at the register entry. 'Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. How can you be so sure?'

The Doctor made a pained expression that had the exact effect of making Rhian feel guilty about doubting him. He whistled as the room charges resolved into big numbers on the 'screen. 'The most expensive hotel on Antimasque.'

Rhian knew that 'most expensive', when considered as a factor of Antimasque, meant strings of zeros like a daisychain across a credit statement.

Several times she'd been frightened to purchase a glass of water, just in case it bankrupted the Doctor's credit chip. Antimasque was a planet where you *played* hard and *paid* hard.

Fast food on Antimasque equated to a meal with only five courses.

The Doctor pulled Rhian aside as a large potted plant got to its suckers and slurped past. Such was the diversity of visiting life forms to pleasure planets; one always had to be one step ahead of the décor.



The Doctor nodded to the plant and indicated to Rhian to do the same. Rhian gave a cursory jerk of her head in the general direction of the potted plant and tried to ignore the Doctor's latest broadside from his arsenal of disapproving frowns. 'Courtesy costs nothing, Rhian. Come on, let's get the Book.'

*Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy! Hy!*

'I can see that it's gone!' Carmodi screamed at Fitz. 'Stop bloody repeating yourself like a stuck holo!'

The small safe in their hotel room had been blasted with some kind of energy weapon. One end was melted away and the Book was gone. Carmodi kicked Bollywood or Bust

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the eviscerated box out of the wardrobe, picked it up and launched it through the window. The glass-field sucked itself back into a flat plane as the safe sailed through with a vacuum sigh. Carmodi seemed to find this almost as annoying as the empty safe, seeing as she was now launching Fitz's recently acquired toiletries at the window. Fitz managed to successfully field the aftershave, but the razor and shaving foam were just a memory.

Carmodi's face was sweaty, her eyes wild. Her breathing was coming in ragged bursts and as Fitz watched, she faltered, became unsteady, and rolled sideways on to the bed. Fitz leapt on to the bed, checking that Carmodi was still breathing. Her glazed eyes jittered between her eyelids before swivelling back into their sockets.

'The Unnoticed,' she whispered.

Fitz felt his guts turn to liquid.

*Suddenly I'm dancing in Lebenswelt. Suddenly I'm dancing in Paris, making the best of the location, wearing a green sari and singing about how unhappy I am since my love has gone away. Now I'm dancing in London, in the shadow of Big Ben. If that Bobby gives me that shiny grin one more time or doffs his bloody helmet at me again I swear I'm going to. . .*

*Sha lakka lakka lakka. Sha lakka lakka lakka. Sha lakka lakka lakka sha!*

Give me strength!

*Since when did I take up singing?*

*Oh God! What is my Evil Uncle Abdul going to do with that sword? Sha lakka lakka lakka. Sha lakka lakka lakka. Sha lakka lakka lakka sha !*

*And why do I have the Book of the Still?*

*'Has she got it?'*

*'Sweet as a nut.'*

*'Thank you, Captain Colloquialism. Why do the locations keep changing mid-song?'*

*'Genre convention. Same with the songs, the dancing and the star-crossed lovers/evil uncle plot.'*

*'Do they usually have sword fights and sing at the same time, or is that you?'*

*'This is all her. Nothing to do with me. She looks pretty hot in that sari though. . . '*

*'Why do we want the Book?'*

*'Because, lunk head, Litian wants it so much. Once I got those memory dumps to play without making me throw up yesterday's breakfast, the Book figured as 156*

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*something hugely important to her. Anything she wants that bad I want even worse. Now the Book is out of Das Museum , how many non-time-travelling Governments do you think would pay to know which time travellers are in their midst?*

*I see a whole new kind of dating agency spreading out before me. . . '*

*'Why don't we just kill her?'*

*'I want her to suffer the loss for a few hours; it's a revenge thing. . . '*

*'And then?'*

*'And then we kill her.'*

*'Oh no. . . '*

*'Svad? What is it?'*

*'I hesitate to use the words "monumental cock-up", but. . . '*

*'It will.'*

*'No, it won't.'* Carmodi was splashing water on her face in the bathroom, her hair darkened by the water, hanging in thick coils around her shoulders. *'The only thing that will make me feel better will be to have the Book back here in my hands.'*

*'What about me? Don't I still have the same effect on you?'*

*'For a while, yes. There're plenty of particles still backed up in your system, but they won't last forever. The Book is an inexhaustible list of stranded time travellers – all I would have had to do was track them down. . . '*

*'Feed them a line. . . '*

*'I'm an addict, OK? What do you expect?'*

*'So we're all just the time travelling equivalent of a "bloke who can get you sorted"?'*

Fitz could see Carmodi's eyes blazing in the mirror. *'If you want to believe that.'*

*'What else can I believe?'* Fitz walked to the window, hunching his shoulders and hooding his eyes. The hotel and pleasure complex of Antimasque was vast, stretching for miles before him in all its cinnamon-bricked glory. A small herd of satyrs gambolled in a lozenge of parkland below the window. A couple sat on their haunches and plucked at lyres. *'If you ask me, we're well shot of the Book. If the Unnoticed have taken it without wanting to destroy the place as an aside, then I for one am ecstatic. So let's celebrate by going to the ball.'*

Fitz heard Carmodi padding from the bathroom.

*'There is a moment. A still point.'*

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He turned.

She had never looked so beautiful, naked save for a towel scrunched in her hair, the evening rays of the binary suns reddening her cop-pery skin. He wanted her so much, wanted to take her in his arms and. . .

‘Still point?’

‘My life has been a constant feeling of motion sickness and nausea. Time shivers through me, ripples my senses. I’m never at rest. But there is a moment of stillness. I was exposed to it once, a long time ago. I can experience slivers of that moment when I’m with time travellers. That’s what I’m addicted to.

That moment. Everything else is sick and giddy and vertigo and pain. Since I’ve been with you, I have been at rest. Once I had the Book there was a chance that I could be still forever.’

Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes. His lips trembled. His heart clunked in his chest at the hollow desperation in her voice. ‘How. . . ?’

And so she told him.

And then they went to the ball.

*Udda-udda! Ha! Udda-udda! Ha! Ha! Udda-udda! Ha! Udda-udda! Ha! Ha!*

*To be honest, she wasn’t even sure she had an Uncle Abdul, let alone an evil one who was now forcing her to dance through a succession of European and Indian cities (beautifully photographed, it had to be said) while singing in a high-pitched nasal tone that she could not decide if it was ethereally beautiful or the musical equivalent of liposuction to the forehead. And if she did have an Uncle Abdul she didn’t think he’d have locked up her long lost love or, indeed, sung a song about it.*

*Udda-udda! Ha! Udda-udda! Ha! Ha! Udda-udda! Ha! Udda-udda! Ha! Ha!*

*She couldn’t even be sure the language she was singing in was real. There were snatches of English and Hindi, but most of it sounded like she was making it up on the spot.*

*Things were getting a little bit desperate now. She seemed to have fetched up in the middle of a surprise wedding.*

*It took her a while to realise that it was her surprise wedding.*

*Bombo! Bombo! Bombo! Bombo! Bombo! Bombo! Bombo! Bombo! Bombo!*

*(Clap! Clap!)*

*‘Can’t you get her to walk out?’*

*‘No, there’s a resistance. The memory acid concentration was probably too dilute.’*

*‘Probably?’*

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*‘It’s an inexact science.’*

*‘Punching isn’t. Especially if you don’t stop that God-awful music!’*

*‘We’ll have to go in and get her out.’*

*‘Have you been thinking again, Gimcrack? What have I told you about thinking? It hurts your head, if not with a migraine, then certainly with. . . this.’*

*‘Sobby Darlod, I’ll dot do anid thindink againd todayd.’*

*‘Of course we’ll have to go and get her out if we want the Book.’*

*‘But you said we can’t risk being seen here on Antimasque.’*

*‘It’s a bloody masked ball isn’t it?’*

*‘Ah.’*

*‘We need to find some masks and sparkly clothes. Move!’*

*‘Nice mask,’ Rhian said, with no little trace of irony. The Doctor fiddled with the bulbous *Il Dottore* mask until he could see through both eyeholes at once.*

*‘Rather striking, isn’t it? Definitely throw any nefarious parties off the scent.’*

*‘Perhaps you should have changed the jacket, too. . . ’*

*‘Ah.’*

‘And don’t you think *Il Dottore* was a dead give away, as well?’

‘So you’re a theatre studies expert as well as a non-linear anthropologist? –

The commedia dell’arte tradition has *Il Dottore* as any manner of professional, a lawyer, an architect, a . . . ’ He was struggling now.

‘. . . a Doctor?’

‘Well perhaps a little more thought could have been put into the selection, I’ll admit.’

Rhian pulled down her Harlequin mask, took his arm and dragged him into the crowds. ‘Well, it’s a good job our lives don’t depend on not getting recognised, isn’t it?’ she said through clenched teeth.

The Burglar’s Excuse-Me

It didn’t seem to matter that the chandeliers began serving drinks because the barstaff were made of light. Rhian was getting a little tired of Antimasque’s

‘dreadfully funny’ visual witticisms and resolved to punch the Doctor the next time he tried the Noël Coward impression.

The Doctor removed his masked head from the champagne-field sculpture of a pair of helix-necked swans and sneezed dramatically, shaking a cloud of bubbles from his hair. ‘Wonderful use of field technology – pity they’ve made no advance on stopping bubbles from going up your nose.’

‘Can you still feel the Book?’

The Doctor almost seemed to be sniffing the air. He nodded slowly. ‘Yes, it’s around here, I’m sure of it. There’s a definite tang in the air. Burning clocks.

Can’t you get it, too?’

Rhian tried but all she could smell was the acrid bloom of various inept attempts at putting on expensive aftershaves.

The Doctor struck off towards the main ballroom.

They had made a fruitless search of Fred and Ginger’s room, but seeing the burnt safe had convinced the Doctor even more that they

were on the right track; the air-sniffing thing coupled with a few giddy moments on the marble staircase had sealed it. Another quick hack of the hotel records had shown that Fred and Ginger were heading for the hotel's main ballroom. So, after a sickeningly expensive trip to a costumier, the Doctor and Rhian had headed down.

They reached the huge ornately carved door to the ballroom and waited in the queue for entry.

*Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Halle-halle!*

*If she was going to get married, then this wasn't the worst kind of wedding she could have chosen. There were certainly many guests. Well, several thousand, actually. She jumped again as the music stormed to a hush and her eyes were filled with an array of crash-zooms of masked faces beneath a colourful selection of turbans. The zooms spun away into a kaleidoscope of whirly faces with Evil 159*

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*Uncle Abdul in the centre doing a dance that would have made Alexei Sayle look sedate.*

*Bam!*

*And they were back into the music.*

*At least the locations had stopped changing.*

*Anji danced into the crowd.*

*Dancing to escape Evil Uncle Abdul.*

*Perhaps running away would have been more efficient?*

The Ballroom was roughly the size of the Isle of Wight, Fitz decided. Chandeliers floated abstract of the ceiling in sedate clusters, an archipelago of light bobbing up and down into the hazy distance. Beyond them, the ceiling was a fantastical frieze of elegant figures, dancing bodies, shocks of colour. Fitz had relented and let Carmodi get close to him again – he felt her arm coiled around his waist – a vestigial tinge of sadness and regret reminding him that the comforted sighs coming from behind the butterfly mask were not entirely driven by her proximity to him *as a person*.

The stairs descended steeply towards the dance floor through suppressor fields which kept the music and its attendant atmospheres at bay until they reached a certain depth. When it reached him, the music gave the impression of being targeted directly at Fitz's ears – not the empty echoed whimper of a band stuck at the end of an aircraft hangar that he was used to in the dancehalls back at home, but right into his head, like wearing earphones.

But unlike with earphones, when Carmodi spoke, he heard her quite clearly, as if the music took a couple of steps back in deference.

'It's here,' she said, almost a whisper. The antennae on her mask quivered excitedly.

The Doctor was a hopeless dancer.

As Rhian tried hide the fact that she was in fact leading and that her partner was completely useless, her shin and ankles screamed in protest as the Doctor's too-pointy shoes barked against them with disturbing regularity.

The crowds around them took no notice. It seemed to Rhian that they could have given up the dancing and just marched through them to the point in the centre of the mass of dancers where the Doctor thought the Book was located, but he insisted that they should not draw any undue attention to themselves, as there was a good possibility that it could be a trap. Rhian thought they were drawing more than enough attention to themselves by continuing to do the The Burglar's Excuse-Me

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kicking-dance – but hey, what did she know? She resolved not to argue too much with the Doctor. He was, after all, the best chance she had of seeing the Book again.

The Doctor tried going left as Rhian went right. They became separated for a moment. 'Can't you follow a simple repeating pattern, for goodness' sake?'

'I can't see my feet through the mask, I'm trying to locate the Book, and your shins keep getting in the way of my shoes. I am doing my best.'

Rhian bit back a sarcastic response.



The Doctor was *frustrated* that he couldn't get the dance right. He was *bothered* by the fact that there was something he couldn't *do*!

The Doctor sighed loudly and tutted. Taking a firm grip of Rhian's hands and drawing a deep breath, he tried once again to throw himself into the dance.

It was the most human behaviour that he had exhibited. Rhian felt connected to him in a way that she had not experienced before. It was a levelling moment that brought a smile to her lips for the first time in days.

'It's not an improvisation!' she managed to say between giggles.

The Doctor wasn't listening or, she thought more accurately, was refusing to listen. He was piqued!

And because of that, in the middle of this whole bitter, violent and desperate situation, Rhian felt, if only for a few seconds, OK.

'Give up on the Book. We don't want it back. It's an Unnoticed-magnet, remember? Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea to come to the ball after all. Let's get off planet eh? Another dodgy credit transfer and we could be half way to anywhere in the next few hours.'

This was absolutely bloody typical. Just when he thought he was getting a handle on the situation, that he might be able to come to terms with the prevailing conditions (*well, what else could he do? He was a man with a mixed-up past and an uncertain future and Carmodi was, after all, all that he had in the universe*) and find some workable way of dealing with both their needs, it was being snatched away from him – *again*.

'I can't forget the Book!' Carmodi's mask trembled on her face, the glittering butterfly antennae quivering. 'The Book is here. Maybe it was just a petty thief who took it from the room! We could get it back and then get out of here.'

Fitz thought about what nasties would then be on their trail but knew that wouldn't cut any mustard with Carmodi. He felt her slipping away from him all over again.

She dragged him into the whirling crowd.

## The Book of the Still

*Sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka*  
The crash-zooms subsided as she entered a slower passage in the score. Her voice still drilled up through her forehead vibrating her nose unpleasantly, and she was catching more of what she was singing about. Apparently, her true love was, in fact, her cousin, and Evil Uncle Abdul told everyone who would listen that a liaison between them would be sacrilegious. What the world and his wife didn't know was that her True Love was her cousin only by legal adoption and not by blood so everything would be all right. Evil Uncle Abdul was the only other person party to this – quite frankly – vital information and was determined that it wouldn't leak out and spoil his own nefarious plans to secretly marry her himself.

*Anji would be his and his alone.*

*Not exactly your average top ten lyric and some of the rhymes were on the tortuous side.*

*The Book shifted beneath her sari and she felt herself making an involuntary grab for it –*

The room spun and a gut-churning splash of vertigo crashed through her.

Giddy, she stumbled backwards. The chandeliers revolved and the ceiling flew away like the beating wing of a huge bird. The room was impossibly large and she was staggering amidst a throng of slowly shifting bodies. The music was wrong. Sedate, ordered. . . a waltz.

Waltz. . .

Svadhithana thumbed the scroll-point on the side of the tracker as the screen flickered and buzzed. It wasn't easy looking beneath Gimcrack's armpit as he danced with him, but he made a game attempt all the same. The mask meant that he only had one free eye to keep on the tracker screen and its blip showing where the subject was dancing – still half a click away through the wretched hordes of dancers.

Gimcrack was patently enjoying the chance to do a bit of dancing and for such a large man was nimbly stepping through the waltz like a natural. 'More to the left you huge moron!' Svadhithana hissed.

Gimcrack obeyed and cut a swathe through another wedge of dancers. Svad had a good, clear signal and they were bearing down on the girl

at a comfortable speed, which seemed to calm Darlow's bitter profanities in Svad's earpiece.

He tried to catch sight of Darlow in the viewing gallery above, but they were so far away now; the masked figures up there had faded into one homogenous mass.

Almost there.

The Burglar's Excuse-Me

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The music changed.

Gimcrack was torn away.

Rhian tried to follow the Doctor as he was swept away by a tall three-legged creature in an admiral's uniform. She cricked her neck turning round and tried to free her hands from the iron grip of the midget on a pulsating snail foot who was stealing her away in the opposite direction.

The Burglar's Excuse-Me was a fun dance but had come at exactly the wrong moment.

Fitz cursed and was pleased that his new partner didn't seem to understand the depth of depravity to which his personal lexicon could sink. The five arms of the angel-winged man ended in nasty claws and he hated to think that he might have assumed that Fitz was referring to him.

Carmodi was nowhere to be seen.

The music began to speed up from a waltz through tango-like beats and into the realms of a dervish. Anji was in the arms of a green-skinned female who was hugging her so tight that her spiky mask was cutting a line of scratches at Anji's hairline and a forked tongue was whispering a damp bossa nova in her ear.

'Wanna come back to my place?'

Anji gulped and was pushed even further into the voluminous bosom.

At each change in the music every leader stole a new partner from the couple immediately to their right. Partners reeled away and legs swirled in the air as gravibelts lifted the more adventurous in gentle

arcs above the throng to land between couples on the correct beat of the song. Others were prised from their partners with dancing-jemmies which hitherto had been disguised in leather scabbards.

Two dancers suddenly found themselves alone and partnerless in the throng.

The taller in the bulbous *Il Dottore* mask shrugged and moved towards the shorter woman with the butterfly covering her features.

The music changed. Rhian extricated herself from the third indeterminate-sex partner she had been forced to dance with and stood up on tiptoe trying to catch sight of the Doctor. With a whoop of joy Rhian saw him between the 164

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figures. He was edging slowly towards a humanoid wearing a large jewelled butterfly.

Ducking various appendages that swooped towards her Rhian crabbed purposefully through the crowd.

Fitz felt that the sensible thing to do would be to wait until the music stopped; when the swapping mayhem died down, it would be easier to find Carmodi.

Unfortunately the music seemed to be getting more and more intense and seemed to show no sign of stopping. Fitz could see that the guy who was groping him close was licking at his lips in a disturbingly predatory way. Fitz had long since got over the shock of visiting cultures that were overtly bisexual (*each to his or her own, innit?*) but the attentions of this current dancer were just a bit too much for him. The music changed again – his partner swung away in search of a more accommodating dancee.

A butterfly.

Just a glimpse, but definitely a butterfly.

Rhian got within arms length of the Doctor.

Fitz managed to touch Carmodi on the arm.

Anji just stumbled between them by accident.

Svadhithana yelled with triumph as he hooked his fingers into the

edge of Anji's sari.

Nobody noticed that the music had stopped.

The ceiling had exploded.

The Unnoticed had come to the ball.

Still Point

A series of orange-blossom explosions tore great chunks out of the ceiling, bringing down rafts of masonry and glass. The chains of chandeliers were blown sideways by the force of the explosion. Some were dislodged from their fields and crashed to the floor amongst the groups of scattering dancers.

Through the smoke and the debris came the trenchcoated aliens, silently descending into the circle of terrified revellers.

The Doctor was yelling at everyone to remain calm and not to provoke the interlopers, but it seemed as though no one wanted to listen. He was knocked over several times while shouting, 'Don't panic!'

The aliens settled gently on the stairs, their lobster claws waving menacing black pods which had the evil look of advanced weaponry about them. Rhian helped the Doctor to his feet as he was knocked to the ground a third time by the stampede.

'Didn't they have tentacles last time?' Rhian said as she hauled the Doctor to his feet. The Doctor clutched his side where he had been kicked as he had gone down, and nodded.

The aliens rested impassively on the stairs, covering the panicking crowd with their pods. A ring of heavily armed waiters had formed around them, waiting for them to make a move.

The Doctor, with Rhian in his wake, made his way towards the stairs, carefully manoeuvring around lumps of ceiling and cascades of glass.

When he reached the ring of waiters, he politely asked to be let through the cordon. The Doctor was politely asked to go and have sex with his mother.

Rhian pulled him back before he could make a riposte. The waiters looked trigger-happy and she didn't want him to be dead just now. The Doctor fumed silently as Rhian tried to calm him down. 'What

good would it be, having you shot before you got a chance to do something?’

If anything, this made the Doctor angrier. ‘What can I do? The TARDIS is back on Lebenswelt. If they plant another bomb, we’re dead. And on top of that, casual rudeness was not at all called for!’

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‘It was him! It was *him*! Let go of me damn you! Let go of me!’

Fitz considered sitting on Carmodi to stop her struggling and wriggling as he tried to hold her down behind the overturned table. *Why is it that the first time I get to squirm in chocolate éclair with a beautiful woman I’m in danger of getting my head blown off?*

He really needed Carmodi to stop shouting.

She bit into the hand which he had placed over her mouth, and he screamed, snatching it away and sucking on the fresh teeth marks.

‘Let me go!’

‘I can’t! Didn’t you see them?’

‘Who?’

Fitz placed a finger on her lips and moved to let her look around the side of the table. ‘Them.’

Carmodi stiffened and slowly came back behind the table. ‘He’s still there.’

‘Who?’

‘He’s my still point! I almost got close enough. He’s the one. I could feel it. There was energy between us – time brought to a standstill. An end to my sickness! I almost touched him and then you pulled me away!’

Her voice was rising from a whisper to a shriek. Fitz held up his arms in the most placating gesture he could muster, but she slapped his hands away. Now that she was free of his restraint, she would not be

silenced.

‘Are you trying to get us killed or what? It’s the Unnoticed!’

She managed to control her body enough to nod but wracking shudders were beginning to course through her. Fitz could see a light flickering in her eyes that was otherworldly, blue bordered with white, a glimpse of a swirling vortex. Carmodi hugged herself and pushed her cheek into the rough wood on the underside of the table.

A keening moan leaked through her bloodless lips.

‘It’s him. . . ’

Result.

*Reeeeeebloodysult!*

They had the girl and the Book and they were less than a click away from their ship!

Unfortunately there were several small flies in the ointment. Their way out of the ballroom was blocked by three-metre trenchcoats and a ring of tooled-up waiters. On top of that, Darlow’s legs had stopped working again. Gimcrack Still Point

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thought the positives slightly outweighed the negatives, but that wasn’t getting them back to the ship.

Darlow struggled to twist his body to look from behind the column towards the staircase. The aliens had not moved from their position and, save for a few clicks from their claws, had remained silent. More security guards had joined the waiters in the ring and were training their guns on the impassive figures.

‘If we could move around the edge of the ballroom, there’s an exit about three hundred metres to our left,’ said Darlow.

Gimcrack could see a glimmer of light falling through the opening. He was sure it was more like five hundred metres away but didn’t really want to argue about it.

After his legs had stopped working, Darlow had suddenly been unable to control the heavy weight of his torso and head, and had plummeted into the ballroom, screaming like a girl. Gimcrack had caught his boss

involuntarily, only afterwards considering the delicious feeling of just opening his arms wide and watching Darlow pancake on the marble floor.

*One day.*

Svadhithana tightened his grip on the girl and her eyes bulged as he cut off the supply of oxygen to her throat. The Book was poking from the top of her sari and Darlow snatched it away. She stopped struggling and went limp.

Svadhithana relaxed his grip.

Darlow began leafing through the Book of the Still.

His eyes began to bulge almost as much as the girl's had.

The Doctor wasn't able to see who actually started firing first because the bolts seemed to come from everywhere at once.

The waiters ran for cover blasting with their percussion weapons. The security guards threw their useless beam weapons aside and just ran for cover.

The Doctor tried to get his wind back, but needed to get Rhian off his stomach first. She had cannoned into him as the firing had started and was now resting across him, breathing hard. The aliens blazed away with the pods, chewing up the marble like dredgers moving through sandbanks. Plumes of liquid rock rose into the air like geysers, splashing through the space that the Doctor and Rhian had just occupied.

Rolling through the gouts of marble chips and the spumes of smoke the Doctor and Rhian managed to make it to the relative safety of a tall column that used to hold up a fair amount of the now destroyed ceiling. Sucking in huge lungfuls of air the Doctor wiped at his watering eyes and tried to shield Rhian

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from the worst billows of marble. A small cut on her cheek had been quenched by a cloud of dust into a red powdery blotch. The Doctor took off his coat and held it up in front of them like a shield.

Rhian burrowed into the Doctors side, flinching at each new blast.



‘What are we going to do?’ she screamed above the battle.

The Doctor shook his head.

Rhian felt once more the Doctor’s frustration. The frustration of not knowing how to dance.

The table was disintegrating with an alarming speed. Each blast that hit it left a smaller place to hide. Soon there would be nothing left to shield Fitz and Carmodi from the onslaught.

He looked around desperately for another more secure hiding place. Behind one of the many fountains his eyes alighted on a small alcove in the wall, just big enough to provide shelter for them both. Speaking above the noise of the guns was impossible so he pointed to the alcove along Carmodi’s line of sight. Then he made two little stick figures with his hands, flicking the legs in a running motion. Carmodi nodded.

He held up three fingers.

Carmodi got to her haunches as they were caught in a blizzard of splinters from another impact.

Two.

On his haunches now, Fitz tried to will a lull in the firing so that it was marginally safer for them to leap from their hiding place.

One.

A lull.

‘Now!’ Fitz was up and sprinting. Immediately Unnoticed beam-fire sizzled around him, marble exploding in clouds, sprays of food hosing on to his jacket.

Smoke filled his lungs with choking breaths. He leapt over the fountain, feeling jagged stone peppering his flanks like shot. He hit the ground behind the fountain on the bony points of his elbows and knees. Yelping, he scuttled to the alcove and pressed himself in, breathing hard.

‘Made it.’

It was about then that he realised that Carmodi had run in completely the opposite direction.

With the shooting now conveniently tearing into the left flank of the ballroom, Gimcrack hoisted Darlow up on to his shoulder and lead Svadhisthana (holding Still Point

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the unconscious girl) in a headlong rush towards the exit. They got infuriatingly close before the beams spat around them again and they were pinned down behind several collapsed chandeliers. Glass shattered around them, glittering in their hair like crystal sequins. The exit was tantalisingly near, but there was nothing they could do until the firing subsided. Gimcrack risked a look above the beached chandelier. The aliens were circling above the desperate waiters, flying gracefully above them, picking them off one by one. Some of the aliens would fire directly into the marble floor, cutting a waiter off from his fellows and making him run in a predetermined direction, his route of flight increasingly bisected with sheets of molten marble. Gimcrack was uncomfortably reminded of rooks hunting down the king at the end of a chess game – the dénouement inevitable.

Pieces of waiter were beginning to pile up in the centre of the ballroom.

Gimcrack whirled as he heard a piercing scream coming seemingly out of nowhere.

The Doctor launched himself from behind the column yelling at the top of his voice. Rhian tried to hold him back but her fingers just snatched at empty air.

She watched helplessly as he ran towards the woman in the butterfly mask who herself was running towards the aliens. The Doctor had first seen her emerging from behind the table as her companion had gone in the opposite direction.

The Doctor had become rigid with tension.

The butterfly mask became detached from the running woman's face by the shock of her pounding legs. The Doctor got to his feet in a sudden rush.

Rhian heard him muttering something under his breath that sounded alien and wrong. Words that felt like they shouldn't be heard; bitter, jagged profanities or prayers to a secret god.

And then he was gone, ducking the rays from the *thubbing* pods as if it

were the easiest thing in the world.

He was trying to save the running woman from the desperate suicidal rush she had undertaken towards the aliens. There was nothing the Doctor could do about the waiters, but the girl could be saved. Rhian saw how well the Doctor *could* dance, when the right tune came along.

The Doctor leaped towards Carmodi as she reached the foot of the stairs, his arms outstretched and his legs kicking behind. Carmodi saw the Doctor flying through the air towards her and stopped dead in her tracks, her eyes wide.

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Just as his fingers caught in her hair, blue energy flickering off each strand, the Doctor was plucked from the air by the huge claw of a circling alien. The last Carmodi saw of the Doctor was his face as he was carried away and thrown with terrible force through the hole in the ceiling of the ballroom.

Fitz had not been far behind Carmodi, running from his alcove when he had seen her heading helter-skelter for the source of the beam-fire. He reached her as the lead alien settled before her. He attempted to drag her away but was knocked back by the swinging claw.

Carmodi knelt before the Unnoticed.

‘Take me home,’ she said.

### Learning to Dance

‘I landed in a tree.’

The Doctor walked slowly down the stairs, wiping at a bloody cut on his cheek with the sleeve of his shirt. Rhian sat among the debris and bodies with her back to the white sphere. The Doctor crouched beside her and ran the palm of his hand over the bomb. He sighed gently and placed his forehead against the cool, stonelike surface.

It was some time before he spoke. ‘They’re using their Wave Interrupter again. Everything’s off. No lights; no machines. Nothing.’

Rhian raised her tear-streaked face to his. ‘What are we going to do?’

The Doctor rocked on his heels, his face blank, deep lines cracking

around his eyes. 'I don't honestly know.' He collapsed his thin legs into a crossed position and settled on the floor like a slow-punctured balloon. The cut on his cheek had opened again and a trickle of blood ran into the corner of his mouth, making his lips impossibly red. Rhian reached into her bag and brought out a crumpled tissue, which she passed to the Doctor.

Distractedly he used it to dab the tears from her eyes.

'You're absolutely sure that's what she said? Take me home?'

Rhian nodded. 'Then she went on about being a *Canary*, that she'd been lost.

She made some symbol in the air with her finger and the alien just opened up its trenchcoat and she walked inside. The guy she was with, your friend Fitz, went up to them and told them the same thing. He made a bit of a hash of tracing the symbol on the air and when challenged, said that he'd been in a war and that he'd had his memories altered. Seemed to do the trick. They let him in as well. They called for the Book and when nobody came forward, they shot another couple of waiters and then vanished like before.'

The Doctor assimilated the information while nibbling at his thumb nail.

'Fitz. Oh, Fitz.' He closed his eyes. Sniffing the air as before. 'The Book is still on Antimasque. The aliens must believe the bomb will destroy it.'

'Why go to all this trouble to destroy the Book of the Still?'

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The Book of the Still

'Interesting question, isn't it? Willing to destroy two planets to get their protuberances on it or destroy it.'

'They must really want that Book.'

'Or are very frightened of it.'

'What can frighten a species that can destroy planets?'

‘What indeed?’

The sphere was to all intents and purposes exactly the same as the one that they had encountered on Lebenswelt. Its smooth surface was impenetrable to anything the Doctor had to hand: percussion weapons, knives, diamond rings.

He had gathered together a posse of security guards and hotel staff to try to push the sphere from its position, but no amount of rope or brute force had any effect. Rhian could see that the Doctor knew that his attempts to find some way to defuse the device were fruitless, but was making a show of doing something constructive to help the people of Antimasque. The local officials had listened quietly to the Doctor explaining what was likely to happen and that there was very little the people of Antimasque could do but wait for the end to arrive.

He, of course, would do everything he could up until the last possible moment.

The local officials had thanked him and then hared off to the spaceport to see if they could get their ships to work.

Rhian wasn't really interested in getting ready to die and had begun to explain to the Doctor what had happened after he had been thrown through the roof and had ended upside down in a nearby tree. The Doctor kept bemoaning the choice of companion Fitz had hooked up with. And now to find that she was in league with the aliens – ‘What is wrong with the man! Doesn't he know how dangerous these creatures are?’

‘As dangerous as a bomb that can destroy the world?’

‘Fair point, I suppose. Frying pan or the fire? What a choice. If Darlow and his cronies had had time to work on Fitz's memories who knows what he was believing when he approached the aliens?’

At least focusing the Doctor's thoughts on his companion seemed to have the effect of dragging him from the torpor into which he had sunk since the local officials had stampeded from the ballroom. The Doctor had variously been shooting at the sphere, digging at it with knives and trying to scratch the surface with his bitten thumbnail. Now he was reduced to sitting by it with Rhian, waiting for the end.

‘I didn't mean for you to be facing death with me here. . . ’

‘I seem to have done nothing else since you sprung me from prison.’

‘Ah yes. Sorry about that.’

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‘I didn’t have to come with you to Antimasque. I don’t do adventures. I should have remembered that. Could have been at home on Sirius One-Bee being hassled by Mother to marry a “nice young man” from a Galactinational.

All Mother’s friends’ sons work for Galactinationals.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘She must be very proud of you.’

‘Not really. She hated Dad being an academic. When I said I wanted to follow in his footsteps, she went crazy! She said to me, “You don’t need a first class brain to get a first class husband, however liposuction wouldn’t go amiss.” I left for university the next day. What about your family?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘I have no memory of them. I can’t even be sure that I have one. I don’t know where I come from, you see. About a hundred or so years ago I lost all my memories.’

‘Hundred or so years? You mean relative to now?’

‘No, about four thousand years relative to now. About a hundred or so relative to me.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I think I’m immortal.’

Rhian didn’t miss a beat. ‘If you’re immortal why do you use a time machine?’

You’ve got a perfect biology for homeostatic time travel!’

‘Tried that. Spent an entire century on one planet. Now I get impatient waiting for an egg to boil.’

‘Men!’

‘That’s rather a generalisation.’

‘You haven’t got long to disprove me.’

They laughed. The sound was hollow in the empty ballroom.

Day was breaking through the hole in the ceiling. As dawn began to

spread across the heavens, the Doctor saw the ship hanging high in the atmosphere above.

Rhian saw it too. ‘They’re still here!’

The Doctor leapt to his feet and danced a jig. ‘Of course! Of course!’

He dashed from the ballroom, clapping his hands.

Stunned for a second by the speed of his transformation, Rhian quickly gathered herself and followed him out.

It didn’t take long to find a telescope – there were viewing galleries on the top of most of the hotels. Rhian was out of breath by the time they reached the top of the stairs and had prised the now defunct automatic doors open on their protesting dead mechanisms.

‘What’s. . . a. . . Resonance. . . Corridor?’

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## The Book of the Still

The Doctor called back over his shoulder, his voice cutting back sharply on the chill air. ‘A way out through the effects of the Wave Interrupter. The aliens are still here because they’re waiting for it to swing around to this side of the planet.’

He spotted the telescope across the roof and changed direction towards it.

Rhian puffed and jogged gamely, clutching at the stitch in her side. ‘Why. . .

don’t. . . they. . . just. . . fly. . . towards. . . it?’

The Doctor swung the telescope around and pointed it up at the speck of the ship. He placed his eye against the viewfinder and after a second or so, thumped the air. ‘Yes! Look!’ He stamped his feet again in a little jig, and with a wide grin across his lips, nodded vigorously for Rhian to look through the telescope.

Rhian did so and could see the burnt spaceship leap into sharp focus.

‘They have no power. They’re waiting for the planet to turn them around to the Resonance Corridor! They’re as helpless as we are! On Lebenswelt, remember how they waited hours before they left? The

whole night? They're probably using a lighter-than-air gas to keep their ship suspended! Now, Antimasque turns on its axis every twenty-nine hours. Let's say the aliens have been out of range of the Resonance Corridor for eight hours – call it ten to be on the safe side – then we have nineteen hours to save the world!

Rhian felt a flower of hope blossom in her breast. The Doctor was jiggling up and down on the stone parapet next to the telescope.

'What do we do now?'

'Find an orchestra, of course!'

Like a wild conductor, the Doctor stood before the hastily convened woodwind and brass ensemble on the bleak tarmac apron of the spaceport. This was the only place on Antimasque that was not elegant or refined. Blocky, stubborn buildings of rough plasticrete squatted before a staggering array of spacecraft.

Wind swept across the expanse, ruffling the clothes of the onlooking crowd, their faces full of fear and yearning.

The Doctor waved his baton and the musicians tried once again to provide power to the floppyscreen draped over the music stand before him.

Finding the musicians had not been a problem. Antimasque had a slew of bands and, of course, they had all followed the stampede to the spaceport.

What had been difficult was persuading the crowd besieging the spacecraft where the local officials were holed up, to calm down long enough to stop Learning to Dance

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shouting about lynching and begin the search in the hotels and ballrooms for floppyscreens and instruments for the musicians to play.

The discordant note that the Doctor had indicated to the musicians to produce howled forth from their instruments. While the Doctor conducted with one hand he feverishly thumbed the 'On' node of the floppyscreen with the other.

The Doctor shook his head and silenced the orchestra with a twitch of his baton. 'One hemi-demi-semi-tone up, please.' The wail struck up



again.

Rhian paced behind the Doctor, feeling like a total spare part. OK, so she didn't *do* adventure; but seeing as the mantle had been thrust upon her she felt that she could be thumbing the 'On' node at least.

The Doctor shrieked with joy as the floppyscreen came to life in front of him. The screen lit up, but was blank – there were no signals for it to pick up. He triggered the recorder on the screen and let the painful note from the orchestra feed into the onboard software. After thirty or so seconds he hit the loop command and the floppyscreen began amplifying the note from its sound field generator.

Rhian felt the floppyscreen in her hands buzz into life. As instructed by the Doctor, she called up the recorder, recorded the note from the Doctor's floppyscreen, and hit the loop command. All around her the people in the crowd were doing the same. The Doctor leapt from his small podium and Rhian swore that he thought the better of a triumphant bow as he hit the plasticrete.

'Right, you all know what to do. Go to the ships, feed the Wave Interrupter interrupter into the PA systems, train the wave in to the engine compartments and navigation control surfaces. I'll go to Air Traffic Control and see if I can get a fix on the Resonance Corridor. Good luck, everyone.'

The crowd dispersed quickly as the note was taken floppyscreen by floppyscreen back to the waiting ships.

Rhian ran with the Doctor to Traffic Control. And, as he passed with the note beneath the light pods in the corridor into the building, lights would illuminate briefly above their heads, only to splutter out as they moved on. In the control room, the Doctor soon had the PA system working and was transmitting the note. Emergency generators kicked in and the screens came to life.

The Doctor jogged around the room flicking a dizzying array of nodes and scroll points. Soon the note could be heard all across the spaceport and the Wave Interrupter interrupter field allowed the vast majority of machines to begin working again. Ships began to lift off almost immediately and head slowly into a holding pattern above the spaceport. Hundreds of craft heading 176

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in formation above the plasticrete. Rhian could almost hear the waves

of relief from the people of Antimasque.

‘Got it!’ The Doctor thumped the screen in front of him and began typing co-ordinates into a spare floppyscreen that he unfolded from his pocket. He pushed the transmit button. ‘All they have to do now is fly straight out through the corridor. They will still have to wait for the corridor to swing across.’

‘Why don’t they just do the same?’

‘Perhaps they’re not musical.’

Rhian wanted to throw her arms around the Doctor and hug him tightly, but he was off again, heading down the stairs to the corridor that led back to the apron.

As they cleared the building, the necklace of ships was heading off into the sky on minimum power.

Rhian was anxious to be on her way, too. She tugged on the Doctor’s arm as he watched the ships filing away. ‘Come on, time we were going.’ One ship was left on the apron, a small yellow picket that had been left for the purposes of their own escape.

The Doctor patted Rhian on the shoulder. ‘You go. I’m going back to the ballroom.’

Rhian’s legs turned to jelly and she stumbled forward. The Doctor steadied her.

‘Just kick the autopilot on and the ship will do the rest. The navibeacons will guide you to the Resonance Corridor.’

‘But you can’t stay. They will still detonate the bomb.’

‘That’s why. You don’t think the entire population of Antimasque left on those ships just now do you? They are just the inhabitants of the pleasure zone.

There’s a whole ecology to save, a world of infinite beauty and indigenous species. I can’t just leave them because I can. I now have the means to possibly disrupt the bomb, or at least localise its effect. I must do it. Rhian, you don’t have to stay.’

Rhian’s eyes dropped. ‘I can’t leave you.’

‘Why ever not?’

Before she could answer Gimcrack knocked their heads together and they fell unconscious to the plasticrete.

With One Bound He Was Free

Rhian made a creditable attempt to open her eyes, but that's all it was – an attempt. The darkness was warm, inviting and meant ideas like planets being destroyed while she was still resident on them didn't intrude.

What did intrude, however, was the Doctor's voice. He was gently calling her name. Rhian toyed with the idea of ignoring him and pretending to be asleep, but before she could a cool hand was placed on her forehead. Her throbbing headache ebbed away immediately.

Rhian opened her eyes and let the harsh light of the twin suns in. The headache roared back to life as she flinched from the brightness. The cool hand on her forehead pressed a little harder and the pain subsided. The Doctor's face, twisted by her tears, swam into a semblance of resolution. A large, purplish bruise on his forehead matched the place where the headache lived in hers. 'What happened?'

'Bushwhacked.'

Rhian wiped at her eyes with the heel of her hand and was surprised to find that she was back in the ballroom.

'I carried you back,' the Doctor said, removing his hand from her forehead and brushing back the hair that was falling into his eyes. 'My head must be harder than yours and you obviously needed the sleep.'

He was managing to smile. Smiling was good. Perhaps the bomb. . .

'I can't defuse the bomb, if that's what you're thinking. I don't have the time.'

The aliens' ship went through the Resonance Corridor about three minutes ago and then they activated it.'

Rhian turned her head to one side and saw with a sinking heart the flickering patterns moving over the surface of the ball.

'Whoever attacked us took my floppyscreen.'

'Can't you activate another?'

‘The precise dissonance and clash of sounds needed could only come from many players playing the exact cadences and timbres.’

‘Oh.’

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## The Book of the Still

The Doctor offered a cup of water to her lips and she drank greedily, slaking the stiff dryness in her throat. When the cup was empty she looked at the Doctor, who was avoiding eye contact. He was looking at the floor, a guilty blush on his cheeks.

‘Why did you have to wake me up? Why couldn’t you let me sleep through it?’

His cheeks reddened even more and he turned away so that she couldn’t see his eyes.

‘I didn’t want to die alone.’

*Sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha! Sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha!*

*The music rose and fell in twinkling bursts. The dancers swirled and twirled in a waterfall of colour. Evil Uncle Abdul was pinned down behind the rocks and now she was a chick with a gun.*

*She waved the rifle around menacingly. Well, as menacingly as she could while dancing in time to the music and singing a litany about her long lost love.*

*Evil Uncle Abdul hid with his huge bodyguard behind the rock, singing a placating counterpoint to her lament. Every time he appeared from behind the rock she would raise the rifle and tighten her finger on the trigger and Evil Uncle Abdul would disappear again with a yell of terror.*

She had the power!

*The Shaman’s cauldron was spluttering and spitting next to his unconscious body. She danced around the prone form again, kicking dust over him and laughing, throwing her head back and letting her waist-length hair twirl about her head like a Catherine wheel.*

*Then her attention was caught by a flickering in the boiling waters of the*

*cauldron.*

*Could it be?*

*Was it true?*

*Yes!*

*It was her Long Lost Love!*

*The litany became a pounding rock beat, a joyous wall of squashy keyboards and grinding guitars. She danced with the gun as if it were her Long Lost Love and the music washed through her like the sweetest liberation.*

*‘She just bloody hit him! She came out of nowhere!’*

*‘Well, if Svad’s not controlling her who is?’*

*‘She’s gone random!’*

*With One Bound He Was Free*

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*‘Are you shouting at me, Gimcrack?’*

*‘No. I’m just stressing the urgency. We’re pinned down. She’s got the gun and if she turns off the floppyscreen we’re all dead, remember?’*

*‘I want you to rush her when I give the word.’*

*‘She’ll shoot me. Or worse – she’ll shoot the bloody ship! Try talking to her again. After all, you are her Evil Uncle Abdul!’*

*‘Stop shouting at me!’*

*‘No! Like this!’*

Rhian placed the Doctor’s hand in the small of her back again and indicated her feet. ‘Watch and follow. . . and one. . . two. . . three and. . .’

The Doctor tried to match the movements of Rhian’s feet in time with her count. He kicked her in the shins again.

*‘Ouch!’*

‘Sorry. Co-ordination without adrenalin; not easy. I have to be really worked up for it all to come together.’

‘It’s only a waltz. It’s the single most uncomplicated dance there is.’

‘Try again.’

‘And one. . . two, three, and one. . . two, three. . . ouch!’

‘Sorry.’

The Doctor stepped back and thrust his hands into his pockets. Rhian remained in position, the flickering light from the bomb up-lighting her face in a way that intensified her annoyance. ‘Do you want to learn to dance or what?’

‘Where did you learn?’

‘Sirius One-Bee. Mother made me. If I was going to stop being a tomboy, I needed to learn something feminine.’

‘I never got around to dancing.’

Rhian’s features softened and she relaxed her arms. *I’mnotgoingtomentionthebomb. I’mnotgoingtomentionthebomb.* ‘Well, now’s your chance.’

The Doctor wasn’t mentioning the bomb either. ‘It’s very sweet of you, teach-ing me how to dance. I like to acquire new skills.’ His face was ashen, just the blue flickers from the bomb glittering in his eyes. She could see that his lips were dry and that his tongue was attempting to wet them, but it was parched too. Rhian took another step closer and smiled. ‘Shall we try again?’

The Doctor nodded and took hold of her hand; he sniffed and set his face into a mask of concentration. ‘Who’s leading this time?’

‘You can, if you like.’ Rhian began to count.

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One. . . two, three. One. . . two, three. One. . . two, three. One. . . two, three.

*Don’tmentionthebomb.*

Just dance around it.

The ballroom was filled with light.

Ouch!

‘On second thoughts, I’ll lead, yeah?’

*Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Halle-halle! Hallehalle!*

*The Shaman raised his head, so she hit it with the butt of the rifle again. The Shaman groaned and fell back to the dusty floor, unconscious once more. She sang a song of triumph and caressed the symbols of power around the cauldron. She dipped her hands into the water to reach for her long lost lover. The water appeared to be boiling but felt cold against her skin. She passed her fingers through the image of her Long Lost Love. He was with his mother and they were singing the saddest song she had ever heard. It drifted through the bubbles to her – the words were of death and destruction.*

*‘I want you!’ she sang. ‘I need you. O Long Lost Love. Transcend the distance between us and be once more in my arms!’*

*Evil Uncle Abdul stuck his head above the rock. His baritone voice coursed thick beneath the beat, like molasses. ‘O niece, let me change my song; let me sing to you of peaceful things. We will not be wed, on that you have my word.’*

*‘I could not marry one so ugly as you.’*

*‘And I have seen the error of my Evil ways.’*

*Sha-lakka sha-lakka sha-lakka sha!*

*‘Let me use a little of the Shaman’s magic to bring you closer to your Long Lost Love.’*

*Halle-halle! Halle-halle!*

*‘All you have to do is trust me. . . ’*

One. . . two, three. One. . . two, three.

He was finally getting the hang of it. Rhian’s shins were no longer feeling like raw meat. The Doctor’s feet moved in concert with hers as they quickened their pace across the ballroom, the bomb forgotten, their interlocking bodies throwing huge shadows across the ruined

marble and the shattered columns.

Rhian looked up at the Doctor, who was laughing freely and throwing his head back with joy. His laughter was gentle, yet powerful; there was a deep sincerity about it that brought tears to her eyes. He really was lost in the With One Bound He Was Free

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moment, pleased with himself that he had got the hang of it and that he was capable of getting it so right.

One. . . two, three. One. . . two, three.

Rhian had long since given up trying to lead the Doctor; his arm was firm in her back, his grip tight and his whirling legs pulled her irresistibly one direction then the next. His feet almost skipped through the moves, he added pirouettes and twirls with abandon.

‘Yes!’ he yelled to the fractured ceiling.

Their dance was like a lap of honour.

*‘She’s going to shoot me!’*

*‘No, she isn’t! Operate the controls – she doesn’t trust me to do it.’*

*‘I don’t trust you, either!’*

*‘Gimcrack, I’m getting very worried by your lack of conviction. Now do what I ask or we are going to die anyway.’*

*‘OK. Which control?’*

*‘The dial in the centre, turn it until you get a lock.’*

*‘Got it.’*

*‘Now the scroll-point – slowly feed in the power.’*

*‘She’s going for the floppyscreen!!’*

*‘It’s all right! She just wants to look! – Feed in the power.’*

*‘Now what?’*

*‘Now she can shoot you.’*



Exhausted, they rested against a column, tears of laughter running down their faces. They hugged each other tight. Rhian breathed the rainy-forest smell from his hair. It had been an exhilarating turn around the ballroom, skipping past the wreckage, past the bodies, around the pools of blood and the churned architecture. Their feet had become a blur and they had no longer needed Rhian's metronome-count to keep time.

Keeping time had become an irrelevance in their headlong, unstoppable dance.

Rhian had felt all her regrets and disappointments litter downwind from her mind; there was just the dance and the Doctor and that was all that seemed to matter.

The Doctor was alive with energy; his body trembled with it as he drew her closer, lifting Rhian on to tiptoe with the force of the hug.

'Thank you,' he whispered into her ear.

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The ballroom was suddenly lost in a blistering burst of blue light.

'Goodbye,' said Rhian.

Things got a little complicated at this point.

The ballroom dissolved around them and was replaced by the dull acoustic interior of a spacecraft. Not any old spacecraft, but one that was full of people with guns involved in a Mexican stand-off and the incessant note from a floppyscreen running all the electronics.

'We're not dead!' Rhian released the Doctor and took a step back as Anji, dressed in a revealing green sari, flung herself at the Doctor. Anji began covering his face in kisses and shouting joyously in a language that Rhian's Universal translator, now working, insisted was gibberish and estimated having to do several more google-flops of calculations before it would be ready to make some sense out of it.

Then Darlow was punching the Doctor in the kidneys, snatching the gun from Anji's hands and generally waving it in their direction.

The Doctor, caught completely unaware by the punch, but

nevertheless seeming to show some relief that the kissing had stopped, fell to his knees next to a body on the floor. Rhian recognised him as Anji's *CreepyEyedBloke* or, as the Doctor had named him, Svadhisthana.

The huge guy near the matter transmitter control was Gimcrack. He looked really angry and was boring a look of pure antipathy into Darlow's back. The look was immediately replaced by blank obedience when Darlow called him forward.

Gimcrack slapped Rhian across the face and sent her spinning into the bank of controls. Seeing as he hadn't been asked to do this, Rhian put it down to transference and resolved to let the matter rest.

The Doctor was getting to his feet and looked less than comfortable as Anji wrapped her arms around him and buried her head in his chest.

'We know the floppyscreen is sending out some sort of signal that shields the electronics from the alien interference. We know that the bomb is about to go off. We are now leaving.' The aim of Darlow's gun settled in the centre of the Doctor's chest.

The Doctor shook his head. 'With the floppyscreen I might still have time to defuse the bomb. . . Give it to me and we'll call it quits.'

Darlow laughed. 'Gimcrack, kill one of the women. I don't care which.'

Gimcrack reached a huge paw for Anji.

I Was a Canary for the Unnoticed

Fitz clicked his heels together and whispered, 'There's no place like home.'

When he opened his eyes, he was still where he did not want to be. He was sure that he'd spent at least a few hours as a swashbuckling Prussian Cavalry Officer in the last day or so, but he'd been so freaked out by what he'd been asked to believe that the Cavalry Officer had drained out of Fitz's mind, like washing-up water out of a sink. Fitz was alternately shivery and hot. He was also feeling decidedly alone, now that he didn't have a memory-acid-induced swordfighter around to soak up some of the fear.

He rolled over on the rough, prickly mattress and tried to get comfortable, but it was impossible; the material of the mattress was

the consistency of raw fibreglass and whenever he moved he felt the filaments sliding into his sweaty, open pores. The heat around him was stifling; perspiration formed a slick film over his skin and ran unhelpfully into his eyes at every opportunity. The pressure of the atmosphere was thick and soupy. He could almost see eddies moving sluggishly through the air. His ears would pop randomly as he moved about.

Living with the Unnoticed was like living inside a head-cold.

Carmodi slept in the corner of the tented room, her back pressed hard against the stiff canvas-like material that made up the walls, floor and ceiling. Her breathing came in short bursts; her sleep fitful and wracked by terrible dreams.

Fitz had thought about waking her up but that might mean addressing *The Questions*. The longer he could hold off getting any answers the better.

*The Questions* were a varied and lengthy list dealing with a number of subjects. Fitz felt he should really frame them better in his mind before asking them, because if he didn't they would probably emerge as screaming paranoid rants that wouldn't be seen dead in the company of answers.

He lifted up his arm in the dim light and inspected the wound made across it by the Unnoticed's lobster claw as it had dragged him inside its coat. The bleeding had stopped some hours ago and scabs were beginning to form; as long as he didn't flex the muscles or twist it about too much, the pain was bearable. What he was worried about, however, was the amount of debris from 183

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the mattress that was accumulating in the sticky exudations from the wound.

He tried to remove as many sharp fibres as he could before the searing pain made it too difficult.

*Inside the coat. The stench of vomit and old blood.*

He shivered. That was not an experience that he wanted to repeat in a hurry. Inside, it had been dark and humid, much the same as the

atmosphere here. The smell up close to the creature inside the coat had been feral and rank, rotting food and wine-sick – Fitz had retched for several seconds, white spots prickling his vision until his stomach had settled down and he could get seriously unhappy about the environment he found himself in.

A cage of hairy, spider-like limbs had enveloped him, making it impossible to move as puffs of foul breath rolled over him from above. The lobster claws had retracted inside the coat and had lifted him off the floor within the cage of spider limbs and deposited him next to Carmodi. He knew it was Carmodi in the darkness because he could hear her crying and whispering her anger at him for following her.

He'd wanted to shout at her, wanted to demand: what had she been thinking of? Leaving him like that! But somehow her tears had held him back. There was a hollowness to them that stilled his tongue and when she wormed her hand out of the cage and found his in the dark – he knew it wasn't to comfort him, it was to comfort her. She was shaking with so much fear that she found it difficult to keep a grip on his hand.

When her crying had subsided and she had stopped cursing him for following her, Fitz had started to formulate some of *The Questions*. The chief of them being, what did she mean when she said, '*Take me home*'? He felt her answer had been unnecessarily sarcastic and waspish, but could understand her reaction under the circumstances.

'I asked them to take me home! What else could I have bloody meant? Do you need subtitles for the hard-of-understanding?'

Fitz had left *The Questions* at that point, preferring to let her calm down a few more degrees before attempting them again. Unfortunately, she didn't calm down even a single degree. 'Why did you have to follow me? You could have died a quick, clean death back on Antimasque! Now you'll die a protracted death in misery and pain! How stupid is that?'

*The Question* that arose from that outburst, which Fitz duly added to the growing list, was: *Well, why didn't you stay for a quick death then if this is going to be so bad?* But of course, he didn't ask it. He just tried to fight the feelings of unconditional love for the woman whom he had been programmed to be I Was a Canary for the Unnoticed

Even with her *giving it heaps*, piling insult on insult and berating him for being so stupid as to approach the Unnoticed, he felt himself slipping into ‘*isn’t she gorgeous*’ mode without warning. When the tongue lashing was at its most intense, Fitz would probably roll over like a puppy to show her his metaphorical belly and slavishly agree with everything she was saying.

Then he would snap out of it just as suddenly as he’d slipped into it, and he would feel the anger rising in him like an out-of-control brush fire. It was only continued evidence of her fear that stopped him from giving back as good as he’d got. He realised that Carmodi’s onslaught was helping to distract her from the reality of their situation and that if he concentrated on it too and collected more *Questions*, he could avoid it as well.

Carmodi stirred on her mattress, her eyes flickering open. She was focusing on Fitz and he could see watery swirls of fresh tears moving across her pupils in the dim light of the tent. Since they’d been deposited in the tent from the folds of the Unnoticed’s coat, Carmodi had not spoken to Fitz, preferring to try to get some sleep. Now she was waking and, however much he wanted to keep accruing *Questions* to avoid having to have answers, Fitz felt his resolve of ignorance slipping. For the first time, the look on Carmodi’s face was not one of anger. She looked at him through the tears with compassion, and got up on one elbow.

Fitz pointed to the bowls of yellow gruel that were between their mattresses.

‘They left them about half an hour ago. Probably cold by now.’

Carmodi dipped her finger in the gruel and brought it to her lips. ‘Nothing gets cold around here.’

‘Tell me about it.’

Carmodi sat up and reached out for a bowl. She began to eat hungrily, using four fingers to scoop out the gruel. Between sucking the food off her fingers, she said, ‘Amazing how it all comes back, the smells, the tastes. I’ve been away for fifteen years and it feels like only yesterday.’

Fitz nodded. He’d been away from something a long time once. He was buggered if he could remember what, but he could relate to what she was saying nonetheless. *Questions* formed a log jam in his throat, jostling with each other for position. Carmodi was obviously picking up Fitz’s unease. She put down the bowl and joined him on the

mattress. She ran her licked-clean hand down his cheek. He could smell the residue of the gruel on her fingers, smoky 186

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bacon with a hint of fresh cut straw. It didn't convince him that he should be trying to eat.

'I'm sorry,' Carmodi whispered, 'I just felt so bad about you following me here. I was angry with myself for not seeing that it was the kind of crazy loved-up thing you *would* have done. I'd hoped I could have been out of there before you even noticed.'

'You thought I wouldn't notice that you were leaving me to die?'

Her eyes dropped and she nodded slowly. 'It would have been better for you. My sentiment hasn't changed even though my delivery has.' She held him close.

A *Question* spat from the jam. 'Where are we?'

'I don't know.'

'More bullshit?'

'No!' She hugged him tighter and kissed the top of his head. 'I really don't know *where* we are spatially. We could be anywhere. What I can tell you is that we've disembarked from the ship and we're in the Tent City, home of the Unnoticed. I was born not five hundred metres from here thirty years ago next month. Guess there'll be no birthday prezzies now.'

'Tent City?'

'City made of tents.'

'I got that bit, I just couldn't think of anything else to say. You keep talking and I'll try to keep up. If you see my eyes starting to glaze over you'll know my brain has seized up.'

Carmodi sat back against the canvas with a deep sigh but kept her fingers on the nape of Fitz's neck. He tried to fight it, but it was hopeless. He melted back into her lap.

'That's better,' she said. 'The reason I don't know where we are is that the whole point of tents is that you can take them down and put them up again somewhere else. The Unnoticed are nomads, but a special

kind of nomad. They can never meet or interact with another race.'

'Except, of course, to blow up their planet.'

'That's the whole point. Their position in the universe is so precarious that any evidence of their existence must be excised *completely*. The world bombs destroy all *life and substance* of the planets on which they are planted. Nothing can be left behind to tell the tale. Not even bacteria.'

Fitz boggled. He'd come across some Mean-Mothers in his time, but to destroy everything just because you happened to have bumped into an Unnoticed in the corridor – that beggared several thousand levels above belief.

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'They destroy races that they even suspect of developing a legend of their existence.'

Fitz was seriously in favour of not finding out any more but Carmodi carried on.

'The Unnoticed don't keep any history, written or oral. They know that their timeline is an anomaly; that they *shouldn't* exist at all. This makes them terrified of time travellers or anything that could jeopardise their existence. You could say that they exist to exist. Not much of a life, but that's natural selection for you.'

Carmodi's laugh turned into a shuddering cough. 'The atmosphere isn't designed for humans, I should have warned you to breath shallow and try not to exert yourself unduly, there's not enough oxygen in the air.'

'A humanoid brought the food. I take it that wasn't an Unnoticed.'

'No. A canary, like me.'

'Canary.'

'I was a canary for the Unnoticed.'

'I was a teenage werewolf.'

'What?'

‘Nothing. Go on.’

‘The Unnoticed need time-sensitives to warn them of any nearby planets with time-travel capability, or passing time travellers who may disturb things enough to threaten their existence. They’ve set up a breeding colony of sensitives to monitor things for them. In the same way that a miner on ancient earth used canaries to warn them of gas in the mine, so we warn the Unnoticed of the presence of time travel.’

‘This is how you got addicted to time travellers?’

‘Yes. And it was why, in the end, I escaped.’

The Unnoticed came for them some hours later.

Carmodi had to stop Fitz from screaming and trying to hide under the mattress when the Unnoticed entered the cell.

When she had calmed him sufficiently to walk with her, his head buried in her hair so that he need not look upon the Unnoticed devoid of its trenchcoat and hat, they were led from the cell along a succession of corridors to a large meeting area where a thousand or so Unnoticed were gathered.

Fitz had, by this time, calmed enough to open his eyes and take in his surroundings – however, when the lead Unnoticed had told him where the Tent City was actually located, he began to scream again and hop around trying to 188

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have as little contact with the canvas floor as he could. This time Carmodi had to slap him.

Several times.

Fitz stood stunned, holding his reddening cheek, surrounded by Unnoticed.

‘Who else knows about this?’ he asked.

The lead Unnoticed came forward and hissed, ‘Anyone who has read entry 3756 in the Book of the Still.’

Entry 3756

The Doctor stepped forward, placing himself between Gimcrack and



Anji. ‘The last time you had the advantage of surprise; I don’t think you’ll find it so easy to sucker-punch me this time.’

Gimcrack faltered in his step as the Doctor struck a pose with his hands at either side of his shoulders, bent at the wrists and one knee tucked up on to his chest. To complete the display he pushed himself up on to tiptoe and made a fitful growling at the back of his throat, fixing Gimcrack with an iron gaze.

Darlow couldn’t believe that Gimcrack was falling for it. He watched as the big lunk stood warily on the balls of his feet, eyeing the Doctor with suspicion.

*For Goddess’ sake, he was three times the size of the other man!* Gimcrack had fists like boulders and was trained in arts of hand to hand combat from a dozen worlds! This was not an equal contest.

Anji cowered behind the Doctor, whispering a rhythmic beat, the now-forgotten laser rifle redundant at her feet. Darlow was only three quick steps from it. The Doctor could not have noticed it lying there – otherwise would he not have already made a grab for it?

Gimcrack took an uneasy step forwards. The Doctor growled and extended his drawn knee out so the tip of his foot was now pointing directly at Gimcrack’s chest.

Gimcrack blinked and flinched as the Doctor suddenly screamed ‘Hai!-Karate!’ at his face and waved his wrists menacingly. Gimcrack raised his hands to cover any attack from the Doctor and came down into a fighting crouch. The Doctor followed Gimcrack’s forehead with the point of his foot.

Darlow puffed out his cheeks. ‘Gimcrack! He’s bluffing! Take him out!’

The Doctor’s eyes flickered briefly to Darlow; Gimcrack took this moment to leap forward, his arms scything through the air wildly, grasping for the Doctor’s throat.

The Doctor went down beneath the onslaught like a felled tree, ending up neatly squashed beneath Gimcrack. Anji screamed and jumped back; Rhian drew in a deep breath.

Darlow went for the gun.

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It was gone.

The Doctor was wriggling beneath Gimcrack and gamely trying to slither out from under the larger man, who was now bending back one of the Doctor's legs in a vicious-looking wrestling move. The Doctor yelled in pain but kept wriggling. One hand came out from the tangle of limbs and began twisting Gimcrack's left ear between pinched fingers.

*Where was the gun?*

Darlow went down on his hands and knees. Perhaps it had been kicked away when the Doctor and Gimcrack had fallen to the floor. He placed his cheek against the deck plate and looked around. The gun was nowhere to be seen.

Gimcrack pulled his head back, yanking his ear from the Doctor's grasp, and then drew his hand into a fist and punched blindly down. Darlow flinched inwardly as he heard Gimcrack's knuckles breaking on the deck plate. The Doctor twisted again and was out from under Gimcrack. Standing over him, the Doctor quickly bent and put his arm around the huge man's neck, in a hold which he secured with his other hand.

Gimcrack roared, stood up and began pounding the Doctor against the ceiling.

Sparks flew as machinery was damaged and the Doctor yelled as he was smashed against the screens above him again and again.

*There it was!*

Darlow saw that the gun had been underneath the Doctor and Gimcrack as they had writhed on the floor. Now it was available to him. He scrambled forward on all fours as the Doctor hooked his fingers into Gimcrack's nostrils and began stuffing them up as far as they would go. Gimcrack twirled, desperately trying to throw off the Doctor, who was now holding on like a slightly dislodged rodeo rider.

Darlow let out an intense scream of pain as the heel of Rhian's shoe ground into the back of his hand, and then fell back as she kicked him in the side of the head. As he rolled away he saw her stoop to pick up

the gun.

‘Don’t shoot me!’ he pleaded. ‘Please!’

It soon became clear that Rhian wasn’t going to shoot him. She was pointing the rifle at the floppyscreen.

Rhian wasn’t at all used to holding guns. In the rarefied air of academe the nearest she got to holding a gun was walking past the Western section of the Entry 3756

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university library. However she’d seen enough holovids to know which end was which, but now that she knew what she knew – it was time for her to intervene.

She also concluded that the Doctor wasn’t just a lousy dancer.

‘If you don’t stop that I’m going to blow the floppyscreen away and then we can all just wait for the end to come.’

Gimcrack stopped writhing and let his hands fall to his side. The Doctor extricated his fingers from Gimcrack’s nasal orifices and jumped nimbly to the floor. ‘Just a couple more seconds, Rhian, and it would have been over anyway,’

he said with a gleam in his eye. Gimcrack began rubbing at his nose vigorously, his fingers coming away smeared with blood and mucus. The Doctor looked at his own hands distastefully and then wiped them quickly on Gimcrack’s jacket.

Anji once again ran to the Doctor’s side and hugged him. The Doctor crabbed sideways out of Gimcrack’s reach, bringing Anji with him. ‘I must try to defuse the bomb. I’ll see if I can find another floppyscreen to carry the Interrupter interrupter. Rhian, I want you to take the ship and fly it as far away from Antimasque as possible. Do you understand?’

Rhian shook her head. She knew that this was what the Doctor would want to do. But now she knew what she knew. . . ‘I’m not leaving you, and you can’t leave me.’

The Doctor looked at her with steel in his gaze. ‘Rhian, don’t be so silly. You know I can’t just let Antimasque be destroyed.’

‘You have to,’ Rhian said quietly.

The Doctor drew himself up to his full, imperious height and placed his hands on his lapels, about to offer an impassioned rebuttal.

‘You have to because of what I’ve seen in the Book.’ Rhian reached behind to the console against which she had been knocked when Gimcrack had hit her.

In her hand she now held the Book of the Still, open at a specific page. She handed the Book to the Doctor.

‘You just can’t get the staff,’ hissed Darlow gleefully.

The Doctor began to read. After a moment or two he looked up. ‘This is why you wanted the Book?’

Rhian nodded, eyes glassy with tears, gun still wavering over the floppyscreen.

‘Your father is a stranded time traveller?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sorry, Rhian, I won’t allow an entire planet to be destroyed just because of your wish to rescue your father. There is a bigger picture, one in which we are but brushstrokes on a canvas.’

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Rhian’s lips trembled.

*Now I know what I know. Everything changes.*

‘Turn the page. Entry 3756.’

The Doctor read the entry.

The Book slipped from his grasp and clattered to the floor.

The Doctor licked his lips and drew in a deep breath. ‘Seal the ship;

prepare for take off.’

The ship powered into the upper atmosphere of Antimasque, the curve of the horizon curling up behind it until it completely encircled the ball of blue seas, ragged land and high columns of cloud. The ship pierced the Resonance Corridor on full power and lanced into interplanetary space as the bomb went off.

A wall of fire twenty kilometres high and covering the entire circumference of the planet began to twist over the surface of Antimasque. The seas boiled into clouds of steam, the land became molten and sunk back into the crust in a crash of magma. The atmosphere ignited in towers of fire that ran across the face of the planet like rivers of orange mercury.

When all the energy was expended, all that was left of Antimasque was a small grey ball: dead, empty and alone.

The Doctor clicked off the viewer and then folded up his floppyscreen. The shell of wave interruption had been left far behind on the conflagrating ball of Antimasque.

He closed his eyes and rubbed the heels of his palms into the sockets. When they came away they were wet with tears. Rhian stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder, unsure of what to say. In the end she decided to say nothing.

The Doctor had been fully prepared to lay down his life to save Antimasque.

The pain she had seen cross his face as the decision had been taken out of his hands had been unbearable to see.

The Doctor had insisted on watching the whole sorry destruction of the planet. Rhian had tried to persuade him not to, but he would not be swayed.

Even Darlow, tied up with Gimcrack and the still-unconscious Svadhisthana, had looked away at the final moment. Anji was curled up asleep in a crash couch.

The Doctor got up from his chair and picked up the Book. His fingers soon found the entry that he needed.

‘Did you know that your father had made an entry in the Book?’

Rhian shook her head. 'I knew it was a strong possibility but couldn't be certain. When I was refused academic access to the only copy in existence, I decided to try to steal it. . . '

'And you know nothing about the aliens. . . or as the entry names them, the Unnoticed.'

'Entry 3756 came as much of a shock to me as it did to you. It *must* be from the future.' Rhian fixed the Doctor with an unflinching stare.

'I hope and pray that it's not a forgery. Otherwise Antimasque. . . '

He couldn't finish, his voice was choked with emotion. Rhian squeezed his shoulder.

'It's not a forgery. I am more than capable of recognising my own handwriting.'

Coming Down to Earth

'At some point in your future, you become a time traveller and you are stranded with the Unnoticed. You have a future. I could not let you die on Antimasque.'

'I understand the mechanics.'

The Doctor rounded on Rhian angrily. 'I know! I'm just trying to make it sit properly with me!' He hugged himself tightly and turned away. His fingers worked away at the material on the back of his jacket, picking at invisible threads. 'I've just consigned an entire ecosystem to destruction for the life of one person. I'm not. . . *comfortable* with this.'

'I can understand that. . . '

'Can you? Can you really?'

Rhian thought about it. The numbers were too big, the concepts too huge.

There was only so far her sensibility could take her before it started to fail her.

Death on such a scale. . .

‘No, I can’t. You’re right.’ Rhian sat back down in the crash couch and averted her eyes from the Doctor, whose fingers were now linked across his back; he was peeling a hang nail from his thumb. The silence in the cockpit was broken only by the distant rumble of the engine and the ‘ticking’ of the Doctor picking at his nail.

‘Tell me about your father.’

‘He should never have married my mother. Then none of this would have happened.’

‘It would. Just with someone else.’

Was that meant to comfort her or bitterly remind her how inconsequential she really was? She had seen the Doctor at the extremes of all his emotions in the last few hours, but never before had she got the impression that he could be cruel, however upset he might become. The concepts and the numbers were probably *not* too huge for his sensibilities. How much pain could he hold inside?

The Doctor remained silent, waiting for Rhian to speak. She wasn’t used to talking about her father. Her voice faltered and she stumbled over the words.

It had been so long since she’d told the story; the tale seemed dry and distant.

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She had to recall the pain, the loss, before the words would flow – before she could tell her story.

‘My father was a wonderful man. Gentle. Caring. All my memories of him are of sunshine, endless afternoons and his arms wrapping me up so tight that I felt like I was part of him. He would race me through the long grass; it would be up to my face but it only reached his waist. His legs were long and strong and I was only six, but he would always lose. I would always be the champion.

Now I know he let me win, but then I was the champion of the world. No one could beat me in the thirty-metre tall-grass-Olympics.’ Rhian stumbled, her mouth dry. She swallowed and continued. ‘He always

seemed to be there at home. I remember that he was there for my every waking moment. Mother and he would never be apart. It was a perk of working for TimeCorp, you worked your working day and then they'd zap you back to the start of the day for family time. Not all workers took the perk, you understand, because obviously you'd be a third older than your family every day, but those who did usually did it to be around their families more, and my father loved to be around us as much as he could. Then one day he just wasn't there. Can you imagine what that felt like to me? There I was, six years old and unable to remember a moment when my father had not been around, and then waking up to find my mother crying and a crowd of strange men in the house. Whispering.'

She paused to take a breath, not because of the emotion, but because she needed the oxygen. The words were coming in rushes now; she couldn't hold back. 'They told me that my father had gone away and they were sure that he would be back and that I was not to worry. They told me to be brave for mummy and to hold her hand so that she wouldn't cry. But *I* wanted to cry! *I* wanted to know what had happened! Of course she didn't tell me until I was older, until she was sure that I could handle it. I spent years expecting my father to walk in through the door, because "He hadn't gone far" and "He was all right". And all the time he was lost somewhere in the future or in the past and no one was telling me anything! Of course the CEO of TimeCorp came and visited me every birthday and gave me presents. Mother and I wanted for nothing. TimeCorp saw to that.'

*Breathe.*

'And then, one day, when *she* thought I could *handle* it, she sat me down and told me that Daddy had been lost in time and he wouldn't be coming back. There had been an accident at the plant and he'd been swallowed up in a leakage and dragged to Goddess knows where. And. . . that. . . he. . .

wouldn't. . . be. . . coming. . . back.'

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She could taste blood in her mouth.

The Doctor was holding her and she hadn't even noticed him taking her in his arms.



*So tight, she felt like part of him.*

He held her for a long time while she wept into his chest, her arms around him as if she was holding on to a life raft in a boiling sea. Anji did not stir and even Darlow and Gimcrack had succumbed to sleep.

When the tears were over, the Doctor wiped Rhian's eyes with the cuffs of his jacket and knelt down beside the crash couch. 'I don't blame you for what happened to Antimasque.'

Rhian's eyes were puffy, red raw. Her pupils swam through fresh tears and the Doctor dabbed at them as they tumbled on to her cheeks. She tried to speak but could not; all she could manage was a staccato exhalation of breath.

The Doctor brushed away the hair that had fallen into her eyes. 'Now I understand why you find time machines so distasteful.'

Rhian moved her head in an imperceptible nod; there were still no words that she could find. The Doctor eased himself into a standing position, wincing as his knees cracked and popped. Anji rolled over on her couch whispering

'Sha-lakka, lakka, lakka, sha. . . ' but did not wake.

The Doctor opened a storage locker behind the flight controls and took out a couple of blankets. One he placed gently over Anji; the other he wrapped around Rhian's shoulders. She pulled it tight across her chest, tucking her legs underneath her body, trying to be as small as possible.

The Doctor perched on the edge of the control panel and regarded the Book of the Still. He picked it up slowly and turned it over in his hands, running his fingers along the spine and tracing the gold leaf tooling around its edge.

He held the Book up to his nose and sniffed it. He shook his head. 'This Book shouldn't exist. If there were laws of time that I could recount then this book would certainly contravene most of them.' He opened the Book and the ceiling light was reflected up into his face, giving it a golden sheen that made his eyes sparkle. Rhian pulled the blanket tighter as the Doctor turned each crisp page of the Book, noting the names and the locations. He ran his finger down the margin of each page before turning it. Then he opened the Book as far as it would go without the spine cracking and held one page up to the light, his face suddenly in deep shadow.

Rhian could read some of the spidery hands that had left their pleas for rescue on the neatly lined page. There were languages that at first she couldn't Coming Down to Earth

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understand which would resolve into familiar script if she stared at them for more than a couple of seconds.

The Doctor lowered the Book and placed it open in his palms. He sniffed the page and then held his ear to it as if listening to the words. Then he closed his eyes and held the Book to his chest, claspng it so tightly that Rhian could see the blood draining from the back of his hands. He stayed like that for almost a minute, his breathing lapsing to a shallow silent respiration.

When he drew in a huge gulping breath, Rhian jumped in the chair, startled.

The Doctor opened his eyes and opened the Book with a snap. 'The vibrations coming from the Book send shivers up my mind. It feels so wrong. Do the various histories of the Book give any indication as to its origins?'

Rhian shook her head. There was plenty she could have told the Doctor about the Book, but nothing about where it came from. 'It was acquired for the Museum of Lebenswelt from an unknown source. Legends of its existence have been around for a thousand years or more. Father. . . '

She lapsed into silence.

'Told you stories about it?'

Rhian remembered to breathe.

' . . . yes. Once I knew what had happened to him, a time accident, then I knew he would try to get a message to me through the Book. My plan was to find out where he was and then use a homeostatic time-travelling culture to take me to him.'

'Hence your interest in non-linear anthropology. What did you really want to be?'

Silence. No breath.

A whisper. 'A dancer.'

'What I mean is, your entry seems to have been written under a certain amount of duress.'

'I wouldn't just write down a set of co-ordinates unless I was sure.'

'You say you are about to be executed. You might have made a mistake.'

That's all I'm saying.'

'Doctor, the entry is from my future, yes?'

'Yes.'

'And we're having this conversation now, in the past.'

'Yes.'

'Well, I promise you that when the time comes I'll make sure that what I write down is completely and utterly correct. Is that OK?'

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'Yes. Of course. I'm sorry.'

Anji flicked open her eyes and as they swam mistily, she tried to get some bearings on where she was waking up. She had vague memories of a dream that had tons of locations, great songs and an overreliance on stereotyped characters – all of whom sang. Had Fitz been plying her with alcohol again?

Fitz.

Fitz!

She sat bolt upright and banged the top of her head on the emergency depressurisation controls of the crash couch. The Doctor strode to her side and rubbed at the painful bruise which was appearing on her forehead. She pushed his hand away. 'You're making it worse.'

Deflated, the Doctor took a step back.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. Look, what's going on? Where am I and

why am I wearing a bloody sari?’

So the Doctor told Anji what was going on, where she was, and why she was wearing a bloody sari.

It took all of the Doctor’s strength and much of Rhian’s to stop Anji from kicking Svadhisthana and Darlow again. ‘Let go of me! Let go of me!’

The Doctor and Rhian managed to get the struggling woman back to the crash couch. Her legs windmilled wildly and the Doctor averted his gaze to maintain Anji’s modesty.

Anji was consumed with anger and continued to scream at Darlow and his associates. ‘You bloody *bastards*! You bloody, *bloody* bastards!’ Rhian and the Doctor were now holding her by the wrists. Anji tried to twist her elbows around and get out of their grip. ‘You wait till I get my hands on you! You wait! Nobody, but nobody mucks about with drugs and my body! Do you understand!?’

Darlow grinned at Anji with bloody lips. ‘That’s quite a kick you’ve got there, little lady. Is that any way to treat your Uncle Abdul?’ Svadhisthana snorted a cruel laugh which had Anji struggling all the more. The Doctor grabbed Anji’s other wrist from Rhian and nodded to a control on the panel. ‘The emergency bulkhead. Drop it.’

Rhian hit the control and a thick transparent steel bulkhead slid from the ceiling, cutting off the cockpit from the main body of the ship; more importantly, cutting Anji off from Darlow and the others.

‘Open it up! Now!’

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The Doctor released her arms and she got up from the couch and began hammering on the bulkhead. Darlow blew her a red-toothed kiss.

The Doctor motioned Rhian to move away from the controls. Anji saw the switch that had been turned and made a lunge for it. There was a ping and a hamburger appeared in the food dispenser above the bank of controls. ‘If you’re going to press any more buttons at random, I would warn you that we are in hyperspace and the consequences could be more catastrophic than an unwanted hamburger.’

Snookered, Anji turned her back on Darlow and faced the Doctor. 'Is this stuff out of my system?'

'I think so.'

'Do I have any other clothes?' The Doctor shook his head.

Anji slumped into the crash couch. 'I take it we're after Fitz?'

'Yes. We've just been having a debate about where he might be. Rhian's future self provided us with some co-ordinates, but I'm having difficulty with them.'

'If I wrote the co-ordinates down then they are correct. However bizarre it seems.'

Anji felt Darlow's gaze on her through the bulkhead. It made her skin feel slimy and rank. *Concentrate*. 'What's the problem with the co-ordinates?'

The Doctor leant against a crash couch and placed his chin on the backs of his hands. 'Well, if they're wrong, then Fitz could be anywhere.'

'And if they're right?'

'Then the Unnoticed have pitched their tents in the photosphere of Earth's sun.'

Are You Out of Your Mind?

Fitz had screamed himself hoarse. Carmodi was putting cool water on his forehead and whispering in his ear that everything was going to be all right.

Fitz didn't believe a word of it. 'We are surrounded by world-killing aliens who have taken xenophobia to a new and as yet unseen level and there is a sixteenth of an inch's worth of material between me and the surface of a *star*,'

he croaked. 'Things are not going to be fine.'

'Don't worry about the tents. They're made from super-string taffeta. You run a thread through the substratum of the universe to produce a material that's one part fabric and nine parts base-line reality. You could use it to wallpaper over a black hole.'

Fitz still didn't want to touch the floor, and sat in the middle of the mattress, legs crossed beneath him, arms tucked right in at his side. 'It looks like canvas.'

'It can afford to look like whatever it wants. Stop worrying about it. I grew up here, remember?'

'And it didn't freak you out?'

'You grew up in a thin film of atmosphere clinging to a grain of rock spinning through space dodging comets.'

'Yeah, well, it felt safe.'

'Everybody's got some place that they call home.'

Carmodi dribbled more water on to Fitz's forehead with cupped hands. He blinked as it went into his eyes. 'I don't usually react like that to weird situations. Screaming and everything. Well, at least I think I don't. I can't remember one way or the other.'

'I think it was the last vestiges of the memory acid. You kept calling for your sword and Connery. Fitzgerald was a seventeenth-century swashbuckler; he would have screamed if he'd met the Unnoticed and found out he was standing on the surface of a star.'

Fitz clicked his fingers. 'Fitzgerald! Yes, I remember. I fought in Prussia!'

'No, you didn't. It was our *Love-Match*. IntroInductions gave us a breathless adventure to fall in love in. You love sword fights, don't you?'

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'I suppose so. I can't remember that either. So I didn't go to a military academy, then?'

'Possibly, but not one in seventeenth-century Prussia.'

Fitz felt as if a huge chunk of him had been taken away. The sense of loss was sharp and cruel. He moved Carmodi's hand away as she tried to pour more water on his forehead. 'That's enough.'

‘All I seem to be doing is taking things away from you. I wish there were something I could give back.’

‘A proper floor.’

‘Once the fast-chain memory acids are metabolised by your system, your memory should rebound naturally.’

‘I wonder who I will be.’

‘It wouldn’t matter to me.’

Fitz lifted his face to meet Carmodi’s gaze. Her lips parted and she leaned in to meet Fitz.

But then the nightmare came into the room.

‘OK, so it wasn’t all Fitzgerald.’ Fitz stood behind Carmodi on the mattress, cowering from the gaze of the Unnoticed. Out of its disguise, the Unnoticed hung below a gas-filled sac that looked as though it were made from slivers of rotting meat. It was shiny and slick with decay; rivulets of slime ran from it and dripped into pouches around a central trunk. The thorax was attached to the balloon by thin ropes of flesh that seemed not to be strong enough to hold the two halves of the creature together. Thin, spiny legs articulated from the trunk

– if it wasn’t for the sac then the creature would surely have collapsed under its own weight. The legs snickered across the canvas floor. Vocal cords flexed and tightened openly as the creature breathed and dribbled. More pouches below the mouth caught the exudates that came from above, holding them in transparent reservoirs until powerful muscular contractions sent them through veins to be deposited back on to the gas-filled sac. There, the exudates ran down again, completing the cycle.

Wormy filaments moved across the trunk of the Unnoticed, burrowing through the hair and flaked skin, disappearing into gaping sinuses and emerging through raw wounds. Some of the worm-filaments would attack each other with fine needle teeth, and vicious battles would take place in the fur. Flesh that fell from the worm-filaments would drop into a last pouch slung between the spindly legs, where they would dissolve in a soupy liquid – the surface of which bubbled like thick acid.

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When it spoke, the Unnoticed's vocal cords vibrated shrilly, buzzing against each other in a sound that resembled fingernails screeching down a blackboard.

The sound made Fitz wince.

'You. Not sensitive. Check gene sequence. You lie.'

Fitz took this to mean he'd been rumbled. It would only have been a matter of time anyway, but he thought he might have been able to get away with it for a little while longer yet. The thought of being out of favour with the Unnoticed filled him with a sick dread. Carmodi began to speak, her voice strong, confident. 'He is time-sensitive. That's why I brought him back to you.

I knew you could use him.'

The Unnoticed's sac flashed blue and expanded, lifting the creature off the floor – its legs worked away silently in the air. Worms disappeared inside the trunk as a spray of exudates fountained from the top of the sac. 'You lie. You escaped. You just not want to die on planet. If you love us like you claim, you would have brought the Book. Sensitives can smell it on you. You bad. We should kill you both.'

The sac reversed its expansion and the Unnoticed settled back to the canvas.

The soup slung between its legs bubbled. 'You bring time traveller here! This is what we try to prevent. When sensitives are satisfied it has nothing to do with our creation, we kill it. You will return to the sensitives. Follow.'

Fitz clung to Carmodi as she nodded and followed the Unnoticed from the cell. The Unnoticed turned, flushing violet and tapping its legs vigorously on the canvas. A gleaming blade appeared from its trunk, wavering gently above Fitz's wrist. 'Unhand it. Or I will scythe off your hands. Choice yours.'

Fitz let Carmodi go.

The aperture in the canvas closed behind them. Fitz was alone.

'There's no reason you couldn't just drop us off at the nearest planet first.'



Svadhithana was on his knees in front of the Doctor, hands tied behind his back. Once Anji had gathered her composure, she had taken great pleasure in ensuring the tightness of the flex around his wrists. 'OK, so we did some bad stuff. You could drop us off with the local police; we don't mind.'

Darlow kicked out at Svadhithana, catching him in the small of the back.

Svadhithana tumbled forwards into the Doctor's arms.

'You spineless cretin!' Darlow spat bitterly.

Svadhithana looked around at Darlow, the whites of his eyes showing brightly. 'He's going to try to fly this ship into a star! Or haven't you been keeping up?'

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'We're dead whatever happens, aren't we? If he takes us back to Lebenswelt we'll stand trial and it'll be the dissolution chamber. I'll take my chances with the star. I don't think he's stupid enough to kill himself and his companions.'

'Ah, but I might be *clever* enough to kill myself and my companions,' the Doctor said, pushing Svadhithana back up into a kneeling position. Svadhithana nodded at the viewscreen on which the star boiled and raged. 'Are you out of your mind? If we get any closer the ship will start to melt. It's not geared up for this kind of locality! *We are all going to die.*'

'I think I preferred it when I was keeping you unconscious,' said Anji, joining the Doctor.

'Be my guest,' Svadhithana snorted. 'I'd rather meet my maker oblivious to my eventual toasting.'

Rhian called from the control panel. 'The mass detector is picking up something. Yes! Right on the button. Exact co-ordinates.' She smiled smugly as the Doctor confirmed the reading. A stream of numbers scrolled across the viewscreen. The Doctor nodded and began to bite his nails, trying to smooth the skin where he had removed the hangnail. Svadhithana screeched with terror.

‘He’s biting his nails! That’s anxiety overspill! He doesn’t know what he’s doing! Will somebody please make me unconscious!’

Gimcrack leaned forward and head-butted Svadhisthana, who fell to the deck plate with a dull thud.

‘Thanks,’ said Anji.

‘My pleasure,’ said Gimcrack, licking a sheen of sweat from his top lip.

The Doctor didn’t have any more nails to bite back, so he began chewing on his knuckles instead. Rhian watched his eyes moving quickly over the streams of data running across the floppyscreen that he had stuck to the wall with chewing gum. His lips moved behind his knuckles, words soft on his breath.

Rhian couldn’t hear them, but they sounded complicated.

The Doctor held out his hand like a surgeon and Anji placed the Book gently in it. With one last glance at the floppyscreen and a squint at the sun, the Doctor began to rip pages from the spine of the Book of the Still.

## Sunburn

Fitz was brought once again to the meeting area. The stench of the Unnoticed was becoming bearable, and being around so many of the creatures was no longer taking him to the edge of madness. The thick, headachy weight of the atmosphere was giving him something akin to a migraine. He was led into the sepia-lit chamber by, he thought (although he had no way of knowing for sure), the same Unnoticed that had been dealing with him since his arrival.

Moving among the Unnoticed were thin white humanoid figures, their bodies bent and twisted, skins aflame with sores. They were devoid of clothing and were hairless. Their big black eyes widened as he entered the chamber; some cowered behind the Unnoticed, oblivious to the rain of slime that was falling on them.

Fitz was brought to the centre of the group and the Unnoticed hovered at a wary distance – their sacs pulsating with myriad shades of blue and violet. The worm-filaments were fighting skirmishes across many of the Unnoticed’s trunks

– slivers of flesh dropping into reservoirs with thick plops. Fitz swallowed, his mouth dry, heart hammering in his chest. *Why don’t*

*they just get it over and done with? What is this, some kind of freak show?*

*A public execution?*

A naked humanoid female came towards him, knuckles dragging along the canvas of the floor. With some distaste, Fitz took in the sores and open wounds on her emaciated body. He surmised that living so close to creatures whose stomachs were open to the air would cause a certain number of injuries. The humanoid, who Fitz took to be a Sensitive from the ranks Carmodi had escaped, inched forward until she was within touching distance of Fitz. All around, the Unnoticed's sacs were glowing a cool blue intercut with shiver lines of black, rolling around in concentric circles. Fitz tried to be dispassionate about the display. Thinking in the voice of some soft-spoken voice-over artiste, he gave what he thought was a creditable impression of the narration of a TV natural history documentary about the Unnoticed: how they obviously used the display as a secondary means of communication and expression of inner emotions. He was just getting on to the theories about them carrying the fighting worms as

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a portable self-breeding food source, when the Sensitive began sniffing at his exposed skin – flicking her tongue in and out of her mouth with a sinister hiss.

Fitz recoiled, taking a step backward, away from the Sensitive. Around him the Unnoticed became restless and began displaying varied shades of blue.

Taking this as his cue to remain still and let the Sensitive get on with the job, he held up his hands in a gesture of apology. This seemed to cause mass panic among the Unnoticed and a dozen blades swished from trunks and trembled around him. Fitz lowered his arms – slowly – and moved towards the Sensitive.

The Sensitive resumed her sniffing and tongue-flicking. Fitz could smell the bitter tang of her breath as she moved up to his face. He made a supreme effort not to flinch and anger the Unnoticed again, who were beginning to put away their blades. To distract himself, Fitz took the opportunity to look around the tented chamber. Above the floating heads of the Unnoticed, the vaulted ceiling billowed as if blown by an unseen wind. The mere fact that he knew that just

beyond the seemingly innocuous fabric of the tent was the burning fury of a star made Fitz avert his eyes in a more fruitful and less intimidating direction.

At the back of the chamber stood a succession of trenchcoats and hats. The open coats were resting on spindly stands – on racks behind were a frightening assortment of weapons and a row of huge glass jars in which tentacles writhed.

Other jars contained blue-speckled lobster claws which moved of their own accord.

The Sensitive finished her assessment of Fitz and was slowly retreating to stand at the side of the foremost Unnoticed. She placed her mouth close to the writhing trunk and her lips moved above the worms silently. Fitz strained to get some impression as to what she might be saying.

*Nada.*

The foremost Unnoticed floated forwards. ‘Not connected to our existence.

Safe to kill.’ The other Unnoticed beat their legs on the canvas and flushed ultraviolet.

A scythe leapt from the Unnoticed’s trunk and bore down on Fitz.

The sun was huge in the viewscreen, heavy and yellow. Anji regarded it with awe, squinting as flares burst from the disc, leaping and curling into the atmosphere. Dark spots moved across the surface. All was fire and heat.

The Doctor was doing something impossible, so it was easier to look at the sun.

Rhian was still at the controls. ‘The radiation shields are just holding, but Svadhisthana was right, this ship is not equipped to be this close to a stellar 206

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source.’

The Doctor *Hmmm* ed and continued to get on with the task of doing something impossible.

Anji prided herself in the faith she had in the Doctor.

Normally.

She would, and had, followed him into countless dangers with the certain hope that he had the edge and that he would usually have the answer that would save her and Fitz's poor little bottoms from the scary monsters and nasty people who inhabited the universe. She wasn't sure how he did it, but there nearly always seemed to be logic to the process.

*But now. . . Well, landing on the sun. Ummm, well yes, well, normally Doctor, I would be more than happy to follow you into danger and whatnot, but could you possibly see your way clear to give me more of an explanation than, 'Oh, I'm reasonably certain this is going to work.'*

The Doctor never said things like *reasonably certain*, but Anji definitely got the impression that this was an endeavour somewhat on the edge of his experience, and to see him unsure was more than a little disconcerting.

She could have contented herself with being nasty and petulant with Darlow, but having him there in front of her, tied up and helpless, took all the fun out of it. She was glad for the confirmation that she would never end up as a gloating megalomaniac who gloried in torture and megalomaniacal things.

Like Goldfinger, Darlow had something twisted inside that Anji was glad did not feature in her makeup.

But the Doctor. . .

Yes.

*Hmm.*

To start off with, the ripping up of the Book of the Still had got a big thumbs-up from Anji, seeing as the bloody thing had caused all the problems with which they were now faced. Yes, get rid of it.

*With you on that one, Doctor. You just go right ahead.*

However, he'd then sat crossed legged on the floor amongst the scattered pages with their desperate handwriting and had started to do the impossible.

The Doctor stood up and admired his handiwork. Darlow laughed hollowly and Gimcrack just sweated. Liquid dripped from his nose in sparkling droplets.

Rhian turned from the controls for the first time in nearly an hour and gasped.

Anji just kept telling herself that the Doctor got them out of situations like this with flying colours.

*Normally.*

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Fitz fell back with a yell and kicked out with his legs. The Unnoticed with the drawn blade swung through empty air and drifted over Fitz's sprawled figure.

Fitz kicked up with his feet into the stomach reservoir between the Unnoticed's legs. With a scream of pain the Unnoticed rose up, slopping acid in a brown splash on to the canvas. Fitz rolled away as the acid rained down, hissing as it continued to digest the Worms.

There was nowhere else for Fitz to go. Whichever way he twisted on the canvas, there was an Unnoticed with a blade drawn and a bright blue head.

*This was it.*

*Attack of the Killer Light Bulbs.*

Fitz's life flashed before his eyes. There were a number of annoying gaps.

*Typical.*

And then, just as it was looking like he wouldn't be saved by the bell, he was.

A high-pitched keening wail filled the chamber. It immediately threw the Unnoticed into confusion. They whirled in the air, unsure of which direction to turn, gas sacs turning from blue to yellow and plumes of atomised slime spewing from their heads in aerosol clouds.

The blades around Fitz were withdrawn and suddenly he was in an

expanding ring of space as the Unnoticed, in blind panic, headed for the exits. They crammed into the doorways like balloons stuffed into a sack, fighting each other with their legs and howling with frustration. Within seconds they were all gone.

A crowd of Sensitives were left looking about in confusion. Fitz got to his feet and approached them, trying to cut out the screeching of the alarm, which was doing his migraine no favours whatsoever. ‘What happened?’

The Sensitives did not answer. Rather, they backed away slowly and then, one by one, they followed their masters from the chamber. Soon, all who were left were Fitz and one cowed figure of a Sensitive on the floor. Such had been the haste of the Unnoticed’s departure, Fitz assumed she had been knocked down unconscious.

Fitz approached the figure and crouched down at her side. He realised that he’d probably only had a stay of execution, but at least he could find out what had been going on. Fitz reached out and tried to turn the Sensitive over from her prone position. The Sensitive resisted, tensing her muscles. Fitz winced at the scars on her body and her shaved head, on which scabby nicks and cuts were evident.

‘It’s all right. I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to talk to you.’

‘Leave me alone.’

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Fitz fell back on to his backside with a thump.

Carmodi Litian covered her head with her hands and howled.

It was a cube made from patchworked pages of the Book of the Still. Two rudimentary wings hung limply from the top edges, meeting in a point across the front of the cube like a huge flattened paper aeroplane. The writing from the lost time travellers covered the structure inside and out. A flap of pages waiting to be sealed made a convenient opening, through which the Doctor now expected them to walk. He told them he would seal the flap and they would land on a star.

‘So we’re going to land on the sun with nothing more to protect us than an exhibit from a Tracey Emin retrospective?’

Anji was getting seriously worried now. When in tight scrapes before the Doctor had had a tendency to improvise, but this? This was something beyond Improvisation-Harbour and was well into the land of Reckless-Death. Was it the destruction of Antimasque that was driving the Doctor to take these risks?

Or was it something else? Something that Anji could not even guess at?

The Doctor tutted. 'It's perfectly safe, Anji. I imagine the Book is formed from the same material as the Unnoticed's Tent City, as described in Rhian's entry in the Book.'

*Imagine. That didn't sound like certainty one little bit.*

'How can you be sure?'

'I imagine –' (*He was at it again!*) – 'the pages are made from a superstring-reality-sub-stratum-material. For the Book to exist in all times and places it would have to be incredibly strong and durable. I don't really have time to go into the physics. Suffice it to say it's flexible, malleable, and has the same tensile strength as solid reality.'

Anji screwed up any more thoughts of panic and realised that she would have to buy into the Doctor's plan if she was going to have any chance of survival –

she would have to trust him. Soon the ship would be a residue of soot in the upper atmosphere of the sun, she really had no choice.

'Get Jeffrey Archer to write his books on it. Critically flame-proof.'

'That's the spirit. Now, everyone inside.'

The Doctor ushered Darlow and the ashen-faced Gimcrack into the cube, then with Rhian and Anji's help he dragged in the still-unconscious Svadhisthana.

It was cramped and dark inside the paper cube. The Doctor had affixed an emergency torch to the ceiling with masking tape. He turned on the torch with Sunburn

a click, filling the dark space with barely adequate light. Anji positioned herself in the corner and braced herself. The Doctor had



told them to prepare for a bumpy ride.

Up close to the wall now, Anji could see that the pages were sealed end to end with no visible signs of a gap. If it hadn't been for the fact that the sheets had been lined and written on, Anji would have taken it to be one continuous sheet of material. She shook her head as she remembered the Doctor constructing the cube, seeming just to have to rub one edge of a page against another to get them to stick together. He'd talked about 'Quantum Velcro' but she wasn't sure if he'd been pulling her leg or not. She didn't want to press him on it in case he had been telling the truth.

The Doctor skipped out through the flap and began to work feverishly at the controls of the ship. Anji heard the engines kick in and roar. The gentle pull of acceleration became an insistent tug. The Doctor leapt back into the cube and started up the floppyscreen which was draped across his arm. Closing the flap of the cube with one hand and scrolling the floppyscreen with the other, the Doctor began to mouth complicated equations under his breath.

Anji caught Rhian's eyes across the dim cube. Rhian looked as scared as Anji felt.

As the ship exploded around them, Anji found that strangely comforting.

'They've just discovered that Lebenswelt wasn't destroyed.'

'This is a bad thing?'

'For the Unnoticed, yes. The absolute worst. It means they've left evidence of their existence in the outside universe. It means that they can be *found*. This is the worst catastrophe that they can imagine.'

Fitz was still finding it difficult to equate the white limbed, hairless, black-eyed creature before him with Carmodi. After a few minutes of coaxing, she had turned to face him and thrown herself into his arms. The smell of the Unnoticed had been on her skin and he had found himself gagging on the odour, but fought the urge to push her away. When she had been able, Carmodi had told him how she'd been returned to the Sensitives and had returned to her natural state, removing all traces of her life outside the Tent City, lest it affect the Unnoticed in an adverse way. Her beautiful eyes had been replaced by black, pupil-less spheres of liquid. She falteringly explained that they were her eyes' true form and that she had disguised them with false lenses since escaping the Unnoticed.

## The Book of the Still

Fitz held Carmodi numbly, not sure of what to say. He knew that he was no longer programmed to love her. The image locked in his mind by IntroInductions no longer matched the one before him. Reconciling the two was an impossible task.

Fitz ran his hand across Carmodi's head, feeling unfamiliar stubble where once there had been luxuriant hair. Tears fell from his eyes and splashed on to her face. She wiped them away with the back of her hand, and then used the flat smooth tip of her thumb to brush new tears from under his eyes.

The Unnoticed had not returned to the chamber and, as Fitz recovered his composure, Carmodi had explained to him what was upsetting them so much.

Fitz stood and held out his hand. 'Once they've sorted that out, I'm pretty sure they're going to come back for me. Let's get out of here.'

'There's no way out.'

'The Unnoticed come and go as they please, don't they?'

'Yes.'

'Then we have a chance.'

'Everyone move forward and to the left!'

Anji and the others crawled towards the front of the cube on their hands and knees. Rhian pulled the dead weight of Svadhisthana by the collar of his jacket. The Doctor stood like a surfer in the centre of the floor space, holding the floppyscreen at arm's length, his eyes illuminated crazily by the green and red light it was throwing out. 'Rhian, push Svadhisthana back about twenty centimetres. That's excellent.'

Anji was having trouble containing the dizzying concept, but she was pretty sure the Doctor was trying to pilot the cube into the photosphere of the sun by shifting its centre of gravity about, putting tension on the wings to move about in the upper atmosphere of a star.

'Back a bit, everyone!' The Doctor squinted at the floppyscreen and

bent his knees to compensate for the sickening feeling of falling they were all experiencing.

There were a confused few moments of weightlessness as the ship disintegrated around them, shaking the papery walls with what Anji thought was excessive force, and they lost contact with the ship's gravity generator. But as the minutes progressed and the gravity of the sun began to have a more positive effect on the cube, they found themselves sinking to the floor and becoming heavier with each passing second. The Doctor informed them that the Book's pages should be able regulate the gravity waves and radiation from the sun.

Sunburn

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*Should be able.*

*Uh-huh.*

When Anji and the others manoeuvred behind the Doctor, she was able to catch a glimpse of the floppyscreen that the Doctor held and was studying so intently. The Doctor had spent a few minutes ripping it from the control panel and then hunting around for batteries to power it. The floppyscreen now had a small piece of machinery lashed to it with wires and masking tape. The cannibalised piece of machinery was no larger than an electronic calculator, but it had a big screen on which a green phosphorescent band was circulating. A blip in the top corner gave Anji the impression of it being analogous to a radar readout. The floppyscreen was a mass of data and lines, flowcharts and danger symbols, all flashing away merrily in red. As the flows of data shifted and the numbers started getting too large for the screen to handle, the Doctor would direct the passengers to move to another area of floor and the red flashing would calm down for a while.

The paper floor bowed sickeningly beneath the Doctor, but he managed to keep his balance by waving his free arm about wildly. Anji and the others began sliding down the incline towards his feet. The floppyscreen started up an alarm which Anji really didn't need to tell her that things were going pear-shaped.

She laid herself as flat as she could against the floor, spreading her weight; this helped to stop her slide towards the Doctor.

Svadhithana, on the other hand, rolled free and went down the slope

like a bowling ball, straight towards the Doctor's legs. The Doctor was intent on the floppyscreen. Anji lifted her head and screamed for the Doctor to look out.

Svadhithana rolled closer; the Doctor nimbly leapt over the rolling body and landed without a hair out of place.

Svadhithana, on the other hand, barrelled into the opposite wall with a thud that woke him. He sat up, his Gimcrack-mashed nose bleeding freely again. His eyes widened in terror when he realised just where he was and he got unsteadily to his feet. 'Let me out of here! Let me out!'

'A bit late for that, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said testily. 'Sit down with the others. I've only got one chance to get this right and you're, quite frankly, not helping.'

Svadhithana made a lunge for the Doctor but he was palmed easily away.

'I'm trying to concentrate! Now sit with the others or we'll all be vaporised!'

Svadhithana wasn't listening, Anji could see that his eyes were wild and his body was trembling. He was too far gone. Anji got to her feet and stood between the Doctor and Svadhithana, using her arms to counterbalance while 212

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the cube was buffeted by the solar fire. 'Svad, I know you're frightened but you must sit down. You're unbalancing the craft!'

The punch took her neatly in the stomach, thrusting up cruelly beneath her ribs. Completely winded, Anji fell and rolled against the wall. It felt as though her lungs had collapsed. Anji mouthed a silent scream and tried to get her lungs to draw in more oxygen.

Darlow stood, nodding to Gimcrack to do the same. 'Untie us, Doctor. We'll deal with him.'

Svadhithana was advancing on the Doctor again, his face a grim mask of sweat and fear, his arms outstretched, fingers like claws. 'Rhian. Untie them.'

Rhian hesitated.

Darlow rounded on her. ‘Come on! Where are we going to go? We want to survive as much as you do!’

Rhian knelt, frozen, hands by her side.

‘Untie them now!’ the Doctor shouted, bending his knees almost to the floor to keep the craft steady.

Rhian got up and worked on the flex at Gimcrack’s wrist. As the bindings loosed, Gimcrack caught Svadhisthana by the hair and yanked him backwards, just as his fingers brushed the Doctor’s coat. Darlow joined Gimcrack and between them they manhandled Svadhisthana to the floor as he kicked, punched, and yelled.

‘Now, everyone! Behind me! Quickly!’

Gimcrack and Darlow dragged the protesting Svadhisthana behind the Doctor. Rhian bent by Anji, who was just finding her first breath, and helped her to the back corner of the cube as she coughed and spluttered, clutching at her stomach.

‘Now fall flat on my command! Three. . . two. . . one!’

They fell flat to the floor, Anji groaning at the pressure against her stomach.

Rhian placed a protective arm around her as they lay still. Svadhisthana was muttering profanities in a dozen languages, but Darlow told Gimcrack to put a hand over Svad’s mouth. Gimcrack held it there until Svadhisthana’s eyes bulged and he had no breath left to speak, then he let him go. Svadhisthana’s head dropped.

The cube shuddered as it came into contact with something on the outside.

‘Tent City,’ whispered the Doctor.

‘Stand back,’ said the Doctor, his fingers poised to remove a page of the Book from the wall of the cube.

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‘So standing back will actually protect us from the naked fury of a stellar source?’

The Doctor turned his head and gave Svadhisthana a hard stare.

Gimcrack tightened his arm around Svadhisthana's neck.

Svadhisthana

clamped his mouth shut and pointed repeatedly to his lips to show how clamped shut they were.

The Doctor's fingers trembled over the surface of the paper, feeling along the edges of the lines where he guessed there would be discontinuity. Droplets of sweat glistened on his forehead and cheeks. Rhian came forward and wiped them with a handkerchief that she pulled from the sleeve of her jacket.

The Doctor nodded his thanks and asked her to join the others at the back of the cube. He bent his fingers and dug his nails into the space between two pages. 'This is the really tricky part; I really should have marked the gap with a pen. Still, I can't be expected to think of everything.'

His fingers scraped uselessly against the material of the wall and he withdrew his hands and blew gently on them, rubbing his thumbs against the pads of his fingers. He made a mime of rolling a pea between his thumb and index finger, and tried again. This time he closed his eyes and Anji noticed that he was holding his breath.

The Doctor again gently touched his nails between the gaps in the words and smiled as he found purchase. The muscles in his hands tensed and a gap appeared between two sheets.

Anji was fully expecting to see a shaft of brilliant light appear in the fissure, but it remained dark. Carefully the Doctor removed the sheet of paper, leaving an oblong gap in the centre of the wall. Anji moved forward and joined the Doctor at the wall, finding it uncomfortable to breathe too deeply after Svadhisthana's punch. The material in the gap was similar to the pages of the Book.

The Doctor was feeling it in the same way that he had the removed page. After a few seconds he tutted, and began to peel back another page from the wall continuous with the gap. 'No discontinuity in the fabric of the tent; let's see if we can find one here.'

By the time he had removed fifteen or so pages, Anji's heart was starting to sink. Soon they would begin to run out of wall, or more worryingly, they might open a gap at a corner of the Tent City that

they could not see.

The Doctor was concentrating hard on the uncovered material and, with an exhalation of triumph, he found the discontinuity he was looking for.

‘Here we go!’

The cube was filled with an explosion of light.

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The depressurisation filled the cube with a rank-smelling stench and a gust of hot wind. Gravity shifted and ‘forwards’ suddenly became ‘downwards’. The occupants of the cube fell headfirst through the opening, landing with a yell on the floor of the Tent City. There was a bang and a flap above them as the cube was sucked in through the gap, ballooning in like a distended organ. It billowed inward for a few seconds and exploded into a confusion of individual sheets raining down on their heads.

The gap in the Tent City had already closed behind it.

The Doctor sat up, rolling the again-unconscious Svadhisthana off his lap.

‘Everybody all right?’

They nodded. Anji felt like she’d been punched again.

‘I hadn’t allowed for the pressure differential. Still, no harm done.’

The Doctor stood, brushing himself down. ‘If you all could stay here and start collecting the Book back together, I’ll see what I can do about finding Fitz and Carmodi. Shouldn’t be too long.’ He strode off down the narrow corridor in which they had landed.

‘Doctor! Wait!’ Anji didn’t relish the thought of being left with Darlow and his cronies. She jogged to catch up with the Doctor and touched him on the shoulder.

The ferocity with which the Doctor spun and the snarl in his voice had Anji stepping back shocked. ‘I said stay there!’

The Doctor turned again, and was off before Anji could gather herself

for a coherent reply.

Anji's breath was catching in her throat – *what was that all about?* This wasn't the Doctor at all – not being able to keep a lid on his emotions, like that

– absolutely unheard of, and ultimately very scary indeed. Before she could consider the matter any further, a waft of bad mouth hygiene billowed into her nostrils.

'Well, you heard the man,' said Darlow. 'Let's get the Book back together.'

Anji felt the anger rising in her. The last person she was going to take orders from was a piece of scum like Darlow. 'Now just you hold on one little. . . '

Darlow was holding a finger to his lips, urging Anji to be quiet. Anji decided to be quiet quickly under the circumstances.

Darlow was pointing a gun at her face.

Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun Fitz had bumped into three canvas corridor bulkheads before he realised that if he'd sent Carmodi ahead, he would have saved himself a seriously chaffed nose.

Carmodi was *persona grata* in the Tent City and its concealed technologies were only too willing to open up apertures for her. She led him through a maze of corridors, limping, one foot twisted awkwardly into the midline of her body.

It seemed there had been other prosthetic additions to her body which the Unnoticed had insisted were removed before she was allowed to return to their service.

'How did you escape?'

Carmodi fixed Fitz with her forever black eyes. 'I committed suicide,' she said simply.

Fitz found an incredibly flip and fringe-sarcastic reply on his tongue – he knew it had only appeared there because he was so uncomfortable with her answer. He let it wither and die before it had time to reach his lips. 'I don't understand. . . '

Carmodi stopped her headlong limp and shivered as if a painful



memory was rolling like a chill mist over her mind. ‘Porconine, as it is designated in Human Space – I discovered a time-source on the planet and warned the Unnoticed that there might be imminent danger. They dispatched a squad to the planet, found nothing. While I was part of the down-team I made an injudicious remark about the swarm-leader’s gas-sac and was tossed over a cliff.’

‘There was no time-source?’

‘No – I just wanted to die – wanted it more than life. I lured the Unnoticed there and decided on the level of injudicious remark that would necessitate my rapid execution rather than slow dismemberment and feeding into the open stomach of the down-team drone.’

‘But you weren’t killed.’

‘No. I landed in the water, and made it to shore half-drowned. By the time I’d made it back to the landing zone, the Unnoticed had gone. I got picked up by a survey team five months later. I was the only intelligent life on the planet – stuck out like a sore thumb. They dropped me off in Gand City. I did a 215

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few dodgy deals finding TTs for dubious characters and paid top credit to have myself made human. Five months on Porconine going cold turkey for time travellers, feeling sick and full of vertigo left me like a thirsty woman who’d just crawled into an oasis. I drank.

‘Gand City always had a TT or two for me to get my fix. When I heard about the Book of the Still, I *had* to have it. I spent a year on Lebenswelt trying to work out a way to steal the thing. Before all this.’

‘Why didn’t you just wait to die on Antimasque – if you knew what working for the Unnoticed would do to you? Do to you again. . . ?’

Carmodi considered this for a moment, her eyes swilling with darkness. ‘I wanted to live. Fifteen years away from this place showed me what I had been missing. I thought that if I came back I might be able to escape again. It was the only way I could see of getting off Antimasque so late in the game.’

Fitz felt a wave of anger rising in him. ‘Game? This isn’t a game!

Antimasque was destroyed because you wanted your fix! Lebenswelt nearly was too! Don't you understand what you've done? If the Doctor were here. . . '

Fitz felt his heart leap like a salmon in his chest. A rush of cold realisation.

*ANJITARDISDOCTOR!*

It hit him in the centre of his brain – a bomb of exploding memories. Gird-ers, books, Beetles, brass, harmony, mahogany, Compassion, skylights, clocks, skipping tracks in his mind like a record player in an earthquake. He stumbled forward and Carmodi caught him in her arms. Fitz slowly slipped to his knees, shaking his head to clear his vision.

Doctor!

As his mind cleared from the shock of rebounding memories he looked up to see that Carmodi's eyes were closed and a keening growl was escaping her lips. In his own rush of unbounded joy he had been blind to the furies that were now attacking her. Carmodi recoiled from Fitz as if stung. She crashed into the canvas wall, her arms and legs starred. Her head twisted from side to side, spittle flying from her lips.

Carmodi was screaming.

'He's here!'

The Doctor knelt by the squirming woman. She flinched from his touch, backing away into the corner and trying to hide under her own legs. Her voice was a harsh rasp of fear and she spat staccato breaths out at the canvas floor.

'Where's Fitz?' the Doctor whispered. 'Fitz and the girl?'

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The woman screamed even more, as if the Doctor's voice was hurting her ears. Eventually she succumbed to the fear and fainted. After checking her vital signs the Doctor shook his head and got to his feet.

He sprinted on down the corridor, approaching a canvas bulkhead. The first few doors he had tried to open had presented a number of problems, but once he had found the knack, they now anticipated his approach and flexed open accordingly.

‘All a matter of positive thought,’ the Doctor said to no one in particular as the latest bulkhead silently shut behind him. At the end of the corridor was another bald, naked woman with the same coruscated skin as the one he had just left. ‘Wait!’ the Doctor called.

The woman at the end of the corridor fell over backwards and began to scream and squirm.

The Doctor closed his eyes and then punched his fist as hard as he could into the wall.

‘Don’t shoot.’ Anji felt that under the circumstances the cliché police would let her get away with that one. When it left her lips, it sounded naff and as it was registered by Darlow, the grin that spread across his face told her that he knew she had broken the *golden rule*. Never let the opposition know you’re scared.

Darlow laughed and pointed to the scattered leaves of the Book of the Still with the muzzle of the gun. ‘Quit shirking and get working.’

Anji didn’t need to be told twice, so she and Rhian began collecting the pages of the Book and handing them to Gimcrack. In Gimcrack’s hands they looked like badly shuffled cards; he had trouble straightening the edges and at one point got a paper cut on his thumb.

Darlow stood on tiptoe and cuffed Gimcrack around the head. ‘Don’t bleed on our meal ticket.’

Anji could see that Gimcrack’s concealed rage was getting less concealed by the minute. She smirked as she caught him poking his tongue out at Darlow’s back.

The last few pages were stuck beneath Svadhisthana’s body. Gimcrack helpfully rolled the unconscious man back with the flat of his foot and Anji stooped to retrieve the papers. It seemed surreal in the extreme to be calling the material *paper* – seeing as they had just used it to hang-glide into the outer atmosphere of the sun. The pages weren’t even singed. Darlow turned his attention to Rhian. ‘The cover, if you please.’

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Rhian’s face was flushed, red. Anji couldn’t tell if it was with exertion or with anger. Rhian did not move.

Darlow aimed the weapon at Rhian and pulled the trigger. A ruby beam of laser light pierced the shoulder of her blouse, and a puff of smoke rose from the penny-sized hole of vaporised material. Rhian winced. ‘That was the lowest setting, book-girl. Give me the cover or I’ll start removing your fingers.’

Anji could see that even at this late stage, Rhian was still letting a flash of defiance cross her face. Darlow’s finger tightened on the trigger stud once more.

A second passed like a year.

Rhian unhooked her shoulder bag and removed the cover of the Book of the Still. She threw it at Darlow’s feet.

Darlow nodded to Gimcrack to pick up the cover.

The big man bent forward.

Anji placed her foot into Gimcrack’s meaty backside and pushed with all her strength. He clattered into Darlow, toppling him in a flurry of ruby laser and spilled pages.

Anji and Rhian exploded through the descending pages at full pelt.

Carmodi had stopped fitting long enough for Fitz to get some sense out of her.

White cords of mucus were looping from the corner of her mouth and her lips worked in the slime like snails. He wiped at her mouth with the sleeve of his shirt and wondered how many light years he was from the nearest packet of New, Square Deal, Surf.

In the TARDIS he was used to his clothes becoming magically clean overnight

– like having a mum again.

‘It’s your friend, the Doctor. He’s here.’

‘What?’

‘You dragged me away from him on Antimasque – he’s here. I can feel him.

And if I can feel him, then the other Sensitives can. He’s the strongest trace I’ve ever felt – I’d recognise it anywhere. . . ’

Here?

Fitz found his voice. ‘Here?’

A hope of rescue. A hope of finding his way out of yet another *desperate-life-or-death-defying-gravity-frying-pan-fire* type thing. ‘Dragged you away from him on Antimasque. . . I. . . ?’

‘Just before the ceiling came down and the Unnoticed landed – I was just about to touch him – I could feel the pulse of buckled time all around his body Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun 219

like an aura. He was going to take me there. *The Still Point*. And you *dragged* me away. He’s followed us here. He’s brought the Book with him. I felt it enter the Tent City. . . and. . . something. . . and. . . ’

And?

Fitz tutted. ‘And?’

‘And something terrible.’

Darlow realised that if he got Gimcrack to rush the bulkheads with his shoulder, seven times out of ten the material would flex open and Gimcrack would fly through without resistance. Of course, that meant three times out of ten Gimcrack would crunch into the material with his increasingly painful shoulder and bounce off into a heap. That was *exactly* what hired hands were for, Darlow reasoned.

With a surprised yell, the charging Gimcrack sailed through the opening bulkhead, landing on his crepitating shoulder with an agonised groan. Darlow pushed Svadhisthana – who was now reduced to giggling – through. Svadhisthana twisted constantly at his wrists which had been bound behind his back with the arm of Gimcrack’s shirt.

‘ *Well, you didn’t think it was going to be my shirt, you big lunk?* ’

Svadhisthana was looking about wildly, a wide grin on his face, pupils showing too much white. As the bulkhead closed and Gimcrack began to warily pick himself up, Svadhisthana blew bubbles in his drool. ‘*“Come into my parlour,”*

said the spider to the fly.’

Darlow slapped Svadhisthana and then marked the bulkhead with a

pencilled

‘X’ so they would know it again.

Gimcrack rubbed at his shoulder and looked thankfully at the length of the corridor they had entered. It would be a few precious minutes before he needed to play Russian roulette with a bulkhead again. ‘We could wander around here for days,’ he said, staying out of Darlow’s reach, just in case.

‘They have at least one ship. We’ve seen it. The Doctor will use it to escape.

If we get to it first, we’re laughing.’

‘But we might be going in the wrong direction.’

‘We’ll find it.’

‘How will we pilot it?’

Darlow had sneakily gotten into range.

‘Ouch!’

‘One problem at a time!’

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Carmodi had lost all sense of direction. When Fitz asked her to lead him to the Doctor, her eyes clouded over and she nodded vaguely in the direction of a bulkhead.

T-junctions were a lottery, crossroads. . . Fitz might as well have flipped a coin for all the help he got from Carmodi. She drifted in and out of consciousness as she picked up the Doctor’s trace. It seemed that he wasn’t a static target; he was moving around freely inside the Tent City. This was confusing Carmodi, or, as Fitz suspected, was distorting her ability to track him. The Doctor had done an awful lot of time travelling in his life – he must feel like the mother lode to her.

‘On Lebenswelt I felt him – but I *assumed* it was you. You were swamped by his presence. Like a planet in the corona of a star. You’re full of his second-hand particles – chronmosis. It was him I was fixed to all along.’

*Well, thank you so much for regaining consciousness long enough to tell me that.*

‘Wait. Please. I need to rest.’

Anji whirled to a stop and looked anxiously back down the corridor at the heavily breathing, red-faced Rhian, who had fallen to her knees, head down, hair dripping sweat. The corridor was empty and the bulkhead at the end was closed. Luckily the bulkheads had opened first time for them – flicking open and closed as they passed. Anji had willed the first bulkhead to open, and to her surprise, it had. They ran off down the first corridor, with the sound of Gimcrack hammering against the bulkhead ringing in their ears. ‘You just have to want them to open!’ Anji had shouted as it had dawned on her. ‘Just think it and they will let us pass.’

Rhian had balked at Anji’s carefree *Open Sesames* – and would just fall in behind Anji as the bulkheads loomed before them. For the last few minutes the bulkheads were becoming more numerous, necessitating the two women into more acceleration and deceleration rather than a steady jog. It was this that Rhian was finding difficult to cope with physically. ‘Just a few minutes, please

– I can’t breathe.’

Anji walked back and hunched down beside Rhian, who had slid down the wall on to her haunches.

‘Why haven’t we met anyone?’

Rhian thought this to be a very good question, and one she had not yet considered. ‘Perhaps we’re being watched,’ was her rather too chilling conclusion.

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Anji scanned the ceiling. It was the same blank material as the walls and floors. ‘Can’t see any cameras – but hey, these guys live on the sun. Perhaps they don’t need cameras.’

Rhian was getting her breath back. ‘Do you think the Doctor came this way?’

Anji shook her head. ‘I dunno. But don’t you get the feeling that however far we go we seem to always be going in the same direction?’

‘Perhaps it’s the walls.’

‘Perhaps. You OK to continue?’

Rhian’s heart was slowing. She nodded.

‘Let’s go, then.’

The bulkhead flexed open and the stench of rotting meat overwhelmed the Doctor enough to make him stumble back. The vast space in front of him was taken up almost exclusively by two things. One was the burnt spaceship and the other was the massed ranks of the Unnoticed who were milling about beneath it in somewhat of a panic.

The Doctor stood transfixed, the cuff of his shirt at his nose to guard against the smell. Gingerly, he stepped through the opening and let it hiss closed behind him. There was nowhere to hide, and so he crouched down on all fours to make himself a less visible target, and sought out a pool of shadow.

The thousands of Unnoticed milled around in buoyant clumps, their legs working wildly, their gas-sacs flashing every possible shade of blue. Acid was slopping from stomachs on to the floor – naked humanoid figures were squirming below, oblivious to the coruscating liquid that was falling on to their skins.

The Doctor’s face took on a complex mix of irritation and horror as far to his left a bulkhead flexed open, allowing Rhian and Anji to stumble through. The bulkhead shut behind them. The Doctor got to his feet and began to jog the perimeter of the tented space dock as nonchalantly as he could.

He kept a wary eye on the crowds of Unnoticed, but they seemed to be more interested on stuffing themselves through the openings in the side of the ship –

unfortunately the jams they had created had left them all gridlocked.

The Doctor leapt over a small wall and landed on Gimcrack’s shoulder. The big man was sitting on Svadhisthana and tried very hard not to yell out in pain. The Doctor rolled off Gimcrack and cannoned into Darlow; kicking out instinctively, he sent the laser skittering into the open space ahead. The Doctor tried to get up, elbowing Darlow on the nose in the process. Darlow went down with a yell. The Doctor got to his feet and continued running.



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‘Why didn’t you make a grab for him!’

‘I’m trying to keep Svad down! If he yells again, those floating things are going to see us!’

‘I’ll hold him. You try the bulkhead again.’

Anji couldn’t take it all in. *What were those things?* She stood stunned, shoulder to shoulder with Rhian. Luckily they hadn’t been spotted yet. It was just a simple matter of backing up to the bulkhead and. . . ‘Open Sesame.’

Nothing.

The bulkhead stayed resolutely closed. Anji thought really hard, stamped her little virtual foot, and tried again. ‘Open Sesame.’

Nothing.

*Bugger.*

The Doctor hit Fitz at just under fifteen kilometres per hour. It felt like a lot more. Stepping through the bulkhead was one thing – seeing as they had succeeded in finding the ship and every known Unnoticed in the Universe – but then being struck unexpectedly from the side and thrown thumpingly into the wall was another.

Fitz moved a few limbs out of the way that he was fairly sure were not his and, with a bloody mouth from where he had bitten into his tongue, cried,

‘Doctor!’

The Doctor was cross-legged on the floor, his eyes spinning comically, and Fitz could almost see the cartoon birds flying around his head. ‘F. . . Fitz?’

Fitz crawled over and hugged the Doctor. ‘Am I glad to see you!’

‘I don’t know, are you? I did just rather have a good go at knocking you unconscious.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Doctor, this is Carmodi.’

Fitz was kind of at a loss.

When the Doctor had finished punching Carmodi to the ground he started to strangle her.

By the time Fitz had gathered himself enough to feel it was time to do something – the Universe was already tilting on its axis.

Mind Bomb

*I really don't want to be here right now.*

Fitz reached a hand out to the Doctor's shoulder and saw that his wrist was elongating like that bendy bloke's out of the Fantastic Four. The exposed white of his arm between his hand and his sleeve began to stretch and twist. The skin between the hairs was expanding. Fitz didn't have any faith in the limb any more. He certainly didn't think it was capable of pulling the Doctor off Carmodi; and now that the Doctor was strangling her, Fitz thought that he needed to find faith in *something*.

The Unnoticed were still trying to get into the burnt spaceship; waves of rippled air moved between them, bending their already grotesque bodies into weirder shapes. Plumes of stomach acid were gushing into the air. Torrents of it caught on the air-time-ripples, turning above the Unnoticed like brown streamers at a dreadful carnival.

*Concentrate.*

Not easy when your legs were folding up around your neck in fleshy bows and your stomach was gradually rippling out flat as a fried egg.

Carmodi was struggling below the Doctor, trying to force her arms between his elbows and scratch her nails into his face. Fitz noted with some interest that the Doctor and Carmodi were unaffected by the distortions which were pulsing across the hangar.

Carmodi was gaining some purchase on the Doctor's arms, and Fitz watched as her elbows began to prise the Doctor's wrists apart. Her knees were thudding into the Doctor's midriff; he was oblivious to the onslaught. Carmodi's face was a vicious mask of aggression.

Fitz made a determined effort to push his body towards the fighting couple, but succeeded only in tying it into a huge knot. Unpicking himself was going to take some time.

A confused Unnoticed floated over the Doctor and Carmodi. It had been elongated into a long snakelike tube from which a blade was flashing wildly –

all it succeeded in doing, apart from covering Fitz in a fine mist of stinging acid, 223

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was to cut itself neatly in two. The now independent pieces of the Unnoticed whirled away on the ripples of air.

Fitz felt nauseous, but, seeing as he was tied in a knot, he knew that at least he wouldn't be vomiting for a while. Using his long spider-fingers to gain purchase on the canvas, he eased his twisted body towards the Doctor and Carmodi. After some frantic scrabbling and painful bending back of nails, Fitz managed to manoeuvre himself within arm's length (*well, what he now considered was arm's length, seeing as he was having so many dismorphic problems*) and began attempting to snag his fingers into the Doctor's hair.

It was roughly at this point that Carmodi unhelpfully lashed out with her foot

– catching Fitz full in the face.

Gimcrack had had enough, too. He floated above the flailing Darlow with a doughnut hole widening in his stomach through which Svadhisthana was kicking like a diver striking up from the depths. Gimcrack grasped wildly for Svadhisthana, but his arms had become the consistency of a floppyscreen. His elbows flexed like nutcrackers and his fingers waved like seaweed. Svadhisthana completed his journey through Gimcrack and whooped with glee.

A blue light was filling the hangar. It was catching the attention of the Unnoticed, who were now struggling less to get into the ship and were turning to face the source of the new illumination.

Gimcrack couldn't really see where it was coming from – it didn't have the quality of *direction*.

It was all-pervading.

Anji had to avert her eyes from the shattering blue, but did not know

where to look. She held tightly to what she thought was Rhian's hand, but when she dared to check, she saw with horror that her fingernails were biting through her own forearm. The buttery flesh was opening up around her hand in plasticine whorls. She tried to yank her hand back, succeeding only in elongating her skin into batwing fans.

Rhian was rolling and twisting – a whirlpool of flesh and rushing terror.

Anji tried to shield her eyes from the light, pulling a sail of skin wide and thin in front of her face. The thick air caught the billowing flesh and Anji was tacked further away from Rhian.

'Doctor!'

She could see him as she turned – he was some way away, but it was definitely him. And Fitz was flying backwards, clutching with spaghetti fingers at Mind Bomb

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an outrush of blood from his nose.

*What was the Doctor doing?*

'Doctor!'

That seemed to do the trick. The Doctor turned to face Anji.

His eyes blazed with blue fire.

The light was coming from *him*.

*Unlocked.*

*The wharf on Lebenswelt.*

*Tied.*

*Svadhithana and a needle. Pain in the base of his skull, a hot lance into the centre of his mind.*

'Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!'

*Darlow's gutter laugh. 'Screams like a girl.'*

*'I'm tracking them on the roof now.'*

*‘Not very inventive. Svadhisthana?’*

*‘It is located and activated. As soon as he comes within thirty metres of her, he’ll want to kill her. Stabbing or strangling?’*

*‘Oh, strangling. Always strangling. This character figures very large in Kreiner’s memories. He’ll find Kreiner for us. And when he does, he’ll find Litian.’*

*‘Almost above us.’*

*‘Ready?’*

*‘Yes. Activate the Mindbomb.’*

*A dream.*

*Kill. Kill. Kill.*

*A voice.*

*Kill. Kill. Kill.*

*Exploding from sleep. Still on the ship! Still on the ship!*

*‘I’ll snap your neck like a Mondroolian river reed!’*

*Rhian! No!*

*It’s Rhian!*

*Stop!*

*The ballroom on Antimasque. Litian, screaming out of the shadows, running towards the Unnoticed. It’s her. It’s HER!*

*Kill. Kill.*

*The claw.*

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*Oooooof!*

Now, bathed in the energy, thumbs meeting across her throat – the tears being squeezed from her eyes. Forever eyes.

Darlow's gutter laugh. 'Kill her. Kill her now.'

A hot weight in the centre of his head, burning. Smelling himself; burning from the inside out. Smoke escaping from his nostrils.

Fitz. Fitz. Grab his hand. Force my head back into the discontinuity. (You only need one hand to kill this bitch.)

Nooooooooooooooooooooo!

*Screams like a girl.*

Don't pull away! Here! Push here!

A scream.

Me?

There! Push your hand into my head. Like clay. Like wet clay!

Ahhhhhhhhhhhggggggggh!

***THERE!***

The world went dark; Fitz fell into himself like a twisted rubber band. His body actually twanged back into shape. He stared into his hand. It was wet with. . .

with. . . what?

In his palm was a tiny silver bullet, jagged around the edges, glistening with slime.

Did I just?

He threw the bullet away as hard as he could. It hit the wall where it spat a brief flash of silver light before falling to the floor with a dull 'tick'.

The Doctor rolled away from Carmodi, holding the side of his head with both hands. He got up on his knees and gingerly took the palms away from his skull and examined them. Apart from a few traces of slime they were otherwise clean. He crawled on all fours back to Fitz, shaking his hand. 'Thank you.

Thank you for not taking a bigger handful.'

Fitz's wide-eyed response was to flinch back from the Doctor. 'Stay away from me!'

The Doctor closed his eyes and sighed. 'It's all right Fitz. I'm quite safe. You removed the Mindbomb. I no longer want to kill Miss Litan.'

As if to reiterate his point, the Doctor made a mime of strangling hands turning into flapping bird wings. He smiled behind the wings at Fitz. 'See?'

Back to normal.'

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Fitz thought he would need some more convincing, but at least felt that it was safe enough to shuffle across the canvas and attend to Carmodi. She was struggling to sit up, hands rubbing at her throat. She was coughing and spluttering, tears streaming from her eyes. Fitz placed a protective arm around her shoulders, moving his body to shield her from further attacks.

The Doctor stood back, looking about warily. As Carmodi looked up at him across Fitz's shoulder, the Doctor chanced a fluttery wave of his fingers.

Carmodi recoiled into Fitz's chest.

'Keep him away from me,' she said in the low sick voice of hollow loss.

If the gas-bags stop panicking for even a moment, we're dead, Anji thought.

Once the distortions to her body had abated and the intense light faded, Anji had pulled Rhian to her feet and led them back to where they had entered the hangar. After two minutes of fruitless *Open Sesame*-ing, Anji admitted defeat.

Rhian's face was flushed with fear. She kept looking over her shoulder at the floating aliens, wincing at their cries. 'What are they?'

'The Unnoticed.'

Anji and Rhian spun around at the sound of the Doctor's voice. He stood behind them with a wide grin on his face. 'No point trying to get

through there

– I suspect the entire Tent City is being collapsed down to this one space. The Unnoticed are preparing to leave.’

‘The Unnoticed?’ Rhian and Anji said in dumb unison.

The Doctor scratched his head. ‘These are the creatures that live inside the trenchcoats. They’re the aliens that will be holding you captive some time in your future, Rhian.’

Rhian gulped.

The Doctor placed his hands in the small of his back, winging out the flaps of his jacket at either side. He surveyed the massed ranks of the panicking creatures. ‘And they are certainly terrified of us.’

He took an experimental step forward and yelled to the Unnoticed to stop being so silly.

The Unnoticed who remained outside the space craft turned as one in response to the Doctor’s strident tone. Ripples of urgent blue dappled their gas-sacs.

Blades were drawn, hissing out of sheaths like snakes. The Unnoticed showed no imminent danger of attacking – but warily considered the Doctor as he stepped forward another pace.

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The Doctor held his hands out in front of him in the universal expression of peaceful intent.

The Unnoticed floated back another few metres, flashing blue and white.

‘Can we not discuss the situation in which we find ourselves?’ The Doctor lowered his hands and smiled. Several dozen more blades were drawn and waved in his general direction. The blades trembled with unconcealed anxieties. The Doctor put his hands into his pockets and lowered his voice, not looking directly at the Unnoticed.

This seemed to do the trick. The restlessness among the throng abated somewhat, and the intensity of blue moving across the skins dulled.



The Doctor kept his eyes averted and whispered, ‘Can I speak with your leader?’

The ranks of Unnoticed parted in a swathe that led in a direct path to a ramped underside entrance to the burnt spaceship. An Unnoticed was being pushed through the opening by spindly legs from above. It was resisting gamely, but after a few hefty pushes and prods from a number of blades, the Unnoticed acquiesced and floated towards the Doctor.

When it was within a blade’s length of him, the Unnoticed came to rest, bobbing up and down on the air, glowing ultraviolet and trembling.

‘Time traveller. Full of time.’

‘Me?’ The Doctor fixed the Unnoticed with a gentle gaze and sketched a smile on his lips. ‘Does that. . . make you uneasy?’

‘Our position precarious. No history. No beginning. Time accident. . . Should not exist.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘Crossed wrong timeline once. Chrono-geography buckled around us. Only just saved home world. Time sensitives keep us safe now. You are here. We must leave.’

‘Why don’t you just kill us?’

‘Cannot do that. Created by time accident. If we kill you, accident may never happen.’

‘But you wipe out planets! How do you know that won’t affect your creation?’

The Unnoticed glowed brightly, piqued. ‘Only when necessary and we go in disguise. No one knows it’s us.’

‘I do.’

‘You are the first and last.’

‘Where am I?’

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The Doctor turned to see that Rhian had joined him at his side. Her face was flushed and she was trembling almost as much as the Unnoticed. 'I asked you a question! Where am I?'

The Doctor placed a protective arm around Rhian's shoulder. 'If you'd let me deal with the negotiations. . . '

Rhian shrugged off the Doctor's arm and took a step forward. The Unnoticed waved its blade under her nose. She slapped it out of the way. 'Don't you dare!

I'm here, aren't I? In a cell. You're about to execute me!'

'I think you're confusing the poor chap with your choice of tenses Rhian. . . '

'Shut up! I'm about to die without finding my father and all you're interested in is sympathising with their plight!'

'Well it is rather an interesting. . . ' The Doctor was winking furiously at Rhian, hoping that the Unnoticed wouldn't understand the connotation. Unfortunately, neither did Rhian.

'Interesting? I could already be dead!'

'If I may have a moment alone with my colleague,' the Doctor said, taking Rhian by the arm and twisting her around. 'I'm trying to gain their trust!' he stage whispered into her ear. 'Please give me a chance!' The Doctor threw a beaming grin to the Unnoticed standing behind them, and put his lips against Rhian's ear again. 'You're not exactly making the task an easy one.'

Rhian pushed the Doctor away. 'I'm not interested in your agenda!'

She ran towards the burnt spaceship, pushing the Unnoticed out of her way as she ran.

The Doctor raised his voice to speak to the Unnoticed blocking the way to the ship as Rhian approached them. 'Please do not harm her! She is being held captive on your ship in a future form. Who knows what havoc will be wreaked on your timeline if you were to kill her now? And I advise you not to execute her future self – because that will make me most angry!' The Doctor's raised voice had the immediate effect of causing splits in the ranks of the Unnoticed.

They moved apart and gave Rhian an even wider berth. Rhian disappeared inside the ship.

‘Do you want me to go after her?’ Anji asked.

The Doctor nodded. ‘If she meets herself. . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Don’t let them touch.’

‘OK. I’ll ask you about the strangling, and the hand inside the head thing, later.’

‘Yes. A little busy right now.’

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Anji nodded and jogged towards the ship.

If Gimcrack held Svadhisthana and Darlow in his arms, they could get around.

He wasn’t sure if they were now sharing the same bloodstream but he could swear he could hear loopy chitter-chatter from Svad, even though his lips weren’t moving, and he was definitely channelling Darlow’s hatred and anger.

Svadhisthana’s ankles were locked into Gimcrack’s back on either side of his spine. If he felt around the locked flesh he could feel the uncomfortable lumps of Svad’s toes fighting for space in his innards next to his kidneys. There was no pain, just an insane ache, which told him things were definitely taking a turn for the surreal. Darlow had fared much worse in the collision of flesh. Half of his face was buried in Gimcrack’s painful shoulder and his torso was fused rib over rib with his upper body. Darlow’s prosthetic legs were crumpled garbage on the canvas floor, the terminated stump of his body flapping uselessly around Gimcrack’s knees.

Darlow used the free edge of his mouth to bite into Gimcrack’s shoulder with unbounded fury. ‘Move around! Move around! I want to see!’

Gimcrack did as he was bid, and turned away from the burnt spaceship, so that Darlow’s one crazed eye could survey the scene and

focus on the Doctor.

‘He’s going to pay for this!’ Darlow spat.

Clutching the Book tight to his Gimcrack-fused chest, Darlow screamed, ‘Find the gun!’

Fitz helped Carmodi to her feet. She was unsteady and had to lean on him for support, her arms linked through his. He wiped the tears from her cheeks. She sagged against him, breathing hard. Fitz wanted to ask all manner of questions but didn’t know where to begin. She probably didn’t have the energy to answer him.

‘We need to get on board the ship. They’re collapsing the Tent City. They’re just playing for time with your friend, the Doctor. Look. . . ’

Fitz looked, and it seemed that Carmodi had a point. Although the Doctor was engaged in dialogue with an Unnoticed, the ranks of other creatures were slowly taking the opportunity to file, one by one, into the burnt-black craft.

The Unnoticed were still for getting the hell out of here, whatever was going on with the Doctor.

‘I must warn him.’

Carmodi shook her head. ‘No. We need to get on the ship. We don’t have any time. The Unnoticed are impregnable pragmatists. Once they calculate Mind Bomb

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they have enough breeding stock aboard the ship, they will leave. We will be left on the surface of this star. We must go *now*.’

He didn’t know if it was the residue of Darlow’s memory acids, or the fact that he’d just witnessed the Doctor trying to off Carmodi, but Fitz hesitated. He hesitated about warning the Doctor. *What exactly did he owe him now? How could he trust him again?* Sure, there had been a piece of alien technology lodged in his brain, but how did he know that had been the only reason he had done what he had done? Carmodi pulled at Fitz’s shirt cuff. Fitz closed his eyes and rubbed them hard with the palms of his hands. He looked from the Doctor to the ship and back again.

*Just walk.*

The ship's insides were slick with stomach acid. The stench of the Unnoticed had a clarity of corruption that had Rhian gagging for a full minute once she entered. The Unnoticed that packed the conduits and galleries inside kept well back from Rhian as she passed; hand over her mouth. A few blades were waved feebly in her direction but contained no intent to harm. Rhian tried not to look too closely at the Unnoticed as she passed, their repulsive bodies spewing stomach acid and gout of acrid steam.

Her natural instinct was to turn and run from the ship, run screaming back to the Doctor, but one overriding thought drove her on.

She was alone, somewhere on board, and she was about to die.

Anji was wondering if she had been born with a volunteer-gene or whether it had been something that had developed during her travels (*travails?*) with the Doctor and Fitz. *Someone to head selflessly into danger? Ummmm – I'll do that!*

Fine, so she felt responsible, to some extent, for Rhian's safety (knowing that Rhian really couldn't have been thinking straight if she was prepared to search inside the Unnoticed's ship for her future self), and with that responsibility came unavoidable reactions to certain situations – i.e. following the dumpy non-linear anthropologist into the depths of the Unnoticed's ship.

Anji decided not to examine the origins of that feeling of responsibility too deeply, beyond feeling sorry for anyone who got wrapped up with the Doctor for the first time through no fault of their own, lest her resolve to find Rhian became somewhat diluted.

Once your sensibilities got over the initial shock and nasal-pain of the atmosphere inside the ship, things rapidly improved a few notches down the scale to *unutterably discomfoting*. Anji yanked a stray edge of sari up over her nose 232

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and mouth, keeping one weeping eye on the conduit ahead, and tried to concentrate on not slipping on the slimy floor.

The Unnoticed were keeping out of her way, allowing her to pass relatively easily, but there were sections where the floating monstrosities were clumped three deep against the walls, and her exposed shoulders were forced to graze along their wormy torsos. Anji shuddered at the cold writhing against her skin.

Through the throng of Unnoticed, Anji thought she caught a glimpse of Rhian up ahead. She quickened her pace as best she could.

Perhaps at least one thing could go right today.

The Doctor's head was beginning to hurt; a headache that extended from the entry point of Fitz's hand into his brain to the fleshy underside of his jaw. A cold arrow of pain that was starting to twist spikily. It was a most annoying headache, and it was affecting his capacity to reason with the Unnoticed.

'I'm sorry; you'll have to repeat that last bit. . . '

The Unnoticed was growing a little bolder, but not much. Its blade, although not re-sheathed, was definitely lower. 'Cannot risk further exposure here. Five time travellers. Unnoticed must go.'

The Doctor blinked, trying to clear his head of the pain. 'There is still so much that I do not understand. So much I wanted to know about you and your species.'

'The Unnoticed will tell nothing. Danger for us in that knowledge. We do not study ourselves, lest observations change timelines.'

The Doctor wondered if it was Fitz's hand or the concepts he was trying to understand now that were causing the pain in his head.

'What happened when I touched Carmodi?'

'Carmodi?'

The Doctor turned and looked about, trying to locate Fitz and Carmodi. He rubbed his eyes. 'I can't seem to locate her at the moment. She was one of your Sensitives. I. . . touched her and there was a release of energy – time seemed to become fluid.'

'Your problem.'

'I don't understand.'

'Your problem. Not caused by the Unnoticed.'

'Ah. You didn't cause it.'

'No.'

'I assumed it was some sort of defence mechanism.'

‘We destroy planets when there is a threat of discovery.’

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The Doctor sighed. ‘I should have realised it was a little too subtle for your methods. All or nothing with you chaps, isn’t it?’

The pain was becoming more bearable and the Doctor kneaded the underside of his chin with his thumbs, clicking his jaw bone noisily.

The Unnoticed exploded in a torrent of stale air and raw acid. The Doctor launched himself backwards, avoiding the worst of the liquid. He looked about wildly.

A monster was stalking towards him, its mouths wide, screaming obscenities, waving a laser in one of its many hands.

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Darlow popped two more of the Unnoticed for good measure, and then levelled the laser at the Doctor’s head. He churned his lips against Gimcrack’s already saliva-wet shoulder. ‘You know, I’ve never had the chance to say this before. . . ’

The half-faced leer split across Gimcrack’s pectoral muscles in a diagonal slash, exposing inner structures, twisted and wet. ‘. . . but, nobody move.’

Darlow’s staccato laugh dribbled spit in a glistening rush across Gimcrack’s skin.

‘I’m not moving,’ the Doctor said, staying still on the floor, eyeing the monstrosity that was the IntroInductions Escort Agency.

Gimcrack took another stiff step forward and the body-locked Svadhisthana howled like a wolf, stuck out his tongue and shook his head from side to side so fast his face became a blur. ‘I’m barking mad!’ he shouted unnecessarily. Then he barked.

‘Slap him,’ spat Darlow.

Mechanically, Gimcrack waved his one free arm around until it connected hard with the side of Svadhisthana’s head.

All three faces winced with pain.

‘I take it the wind changed at an inopportune moment.’

The laser bit painfully into the back of the Doctor’s hand. He snatched it away and sucked at the blistered surface of his skin. ‘I hold you responsible for this, Doctor – so, if I were you, I wouldn’t try smart-mouthing me at this. . .

ah. . . ’ – drool glistened on Darlow’s grey teeth – ‘. . . emotionally charged time.’

Darlow closed his eyes for a moment and Gimcrack nodded, turning to give Darlow a view over the massed Unnoticed. The gas-sacs were flashing the furious blues and whites of fear. ‘I will be leaving on that ship. If you try to stop me, Gimcrack will write the timings of your visit to Lebenswelt into the Book of the Still, and exactly *how* to destroy you. I have no qualms about wiping you out right now. . . ah, right *then*. . . Understand?’

Gimcrack reached into his shirt, pulled out the Book of the Still, and held it up, like a trophy. The Unnoticed flushed with panic and tried to hide under-234

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neath each other. Svadhisthana waved a scribing-tool around for good measure. The Unnoticed screamed and quivered.

‘The pen is mightier than the sword, eh, Doctor?’

The Doctor lowered his hand from his mouth and nodded gravely. ‘You do know that if you do what you’re suggesting, then the Book will suddenly not be here for you to write in? You can’t just set up a paradox to destroy another paradox, Darlow. These things have a way of limiting themselves, I imagine.

The Unnoticed *are* a paradox – they are precariously balanced in time. If they are removed, who knows what else will unravel? Have you considered that?’

Darlow, Gimcrack, and Svadhisthana shook their heads with varying degrees of understanding. Darlow spoke and Gimcrack’s lips moved silently along with the words. ‘You think I care at this moment? It may have escaped your notice, but I’ve been fused into the bodies of my employees! If I destroy the Unnoticed before I come here, then I



do not end up like this! *Seems simple to me.* And, I get to kill you. Twice. Once now, and then again back on Lebenswelt when I track you down. Everyone's a winner.'

Darlow took aim again.

'Goodbye, Doctor.'

Fitz stood on the threshold of the ship with Carmodi urging him forward into the rank darkness. He looked back over his shoulder at the Doctor who was cowed at the feet of. . . of. . . ewwwwwww!

Fitz breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't been similarly trapped with his hand inside the Doctor's head when everything had returned to. . . he hesitated to use the word 'normal'.

Carmodi was pushing him hard in the small of the back towards the ramp.

'Forget him!'

Fitz stood his ground. *What was he doing?* Leaving the Doctor to fend for himself? *What was he thinking of?* 'No, wait, I can't. The Doctor. . . '

A fuzzy blur in his mind, Carmodi's face, a shudder through his heart and. . .

NO.

NOT AGAIN.

'You go if you want. I must help him.'

'Fitz!'

'I've been engineered to love you, Carmodi. With the Doctor. . . it's the real thing.'

Fitz pushed past Carmodi and set off at a run.

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Rhian fell back out of the room, straight into Anji's arms, as the door slammed shut. Anji was thrown back against the wall, and they slid to the floor in an untidy heap amongst the slime and the ash and the

soot.

Anji had just made it around the corner of the conduit when she'd seen Rhian walking through the opening in the wall. She had reached the opening as a shutter whooshed down, leaving her alone in the conduit. Alone, that is, save for floating, silent Unnoticed.

Anji had gingerly placed her ear against the shutter and strained to hear what was happening inside. There were no sounds emanating from the room. For five minutes there was nothing. . . until. . .

WHOOSH!!

Anji pushed Rhian off and rolled up to her feet.

'Did you touch?'

Rhian shook her head. 'Not exactly.' Rhian leapt up and grabbed Anji by the wrist. 'Thanks for following. Can you remember the way out?'

Anji thought for a moment. 'I think so.'

'Then let's get out of here. We've got about ten minutes before it all catches up with us.'

'What catches up with us?'

'Non-linear time.'

Darlow pulled the trigger.

The Doctor closed his eyes.

Fitz, in midair, took the laser burn across the shoulder, and then clattered into the IntroInductions agglomeration in full flight. Unstable already from the extra burden of Svadhisthana and Darlow, Gimcrack toppled sedately backwards as Fitz bounced off. The beam of the laser scythed across the attendant Unnoticed, popping gas-sacs and leaving a swathe of terror.

The Doctor got up and kicked the laser from Darlow's grip. The gun skittered away into a dark corner of the hangar. The Doctor was about to open his mouth to offer a savage rebuke to Darlow when the burnt spaceship imploded.

The flaky black surface of the ship buckled and twisted, puffs of soot punching into the air. The sick sounds of caving superstructure cut

across every other sound in the hangar, drawing terrified glances from the assembled humanoids and blue flashes from the Unnoticed. Then, with a percussive clap and an underworld clang the ship was gone, ripped completely out of reality.

The inrush of air into the huge new area of vacuum threw anyone still standing off their feet and sucked the remaining Unnoticed into a horrified clump Dancing

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in the centre of the hangar. As the wind subsided, the floating aliens began milling around, screaming that they had been 'left to die' by their comrades.

Spumes of stomach acid fountained around them and from the confusion came Rhian and Anji carrying a body between them.

Fitz howled and clutched at his shoulder. 'Bugger. Bugger. Bugger. That buggering-well buggering hurts!'

The Doctor picked himself up again and took a quick look at Fitz's red-raw shoulder. 'You'll live.'

'That's what I was afraid of – living in a world without paracetamol.'

The Doctor ruffled Fitz's hair like a child and smiled. 'Hello, Fitz. Long time, no see.'

Fitz grimaced a half-smile and took the Doctor's proffered hand, hauling himself up into a standing position. 'That's yet another one you owe me, mate.'

The Doctor nodded.

Gimcrack was writhing on his back like a flipped turtle. Darlow pushed up with his hands, trying to right the huge twisted body, but the flailing weight of Svadhisthana made it impossible. 'Help me up, damn you!' Darlow screamed through Gimcrack's shoulder. Svadhisthana just sang a confused jumble of Adam Ant lyrics about Dandy Highwaymen and Charming Princes.

The Doctor shook his head. 'I don't think so, Darlow. In your condition, I think it might be best if you had a rest.'

Rhian and Anji arrived, breathless, placing the unconscious Carmodi

on the canvas a little more heavily than they had intended. Fitz saw the spreading bruise on the side of Carmodi's face. Rhian was sucking the knuckles of her right hand. Fitz looked at Rhian and raised an eyebrow, indicating Carmodi's cheek.

'She wouldn't listen. I've never punched anybody like that before. I wasn't sure how hard to do it.'

'I think it did the trick,' said Anji, picking sticky Unnoticed stomach contents from her hair.

Rhian approached the Doctor. 'We don't have any time. We must persuade the Unnoticed to cease to exist.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

'You've spent so much time forging a society that has a primary objective of anonymity and hiding; can't you see that non-existence would be the ultimate expression of that aim?'

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The Doctor was impressed by Rhian's argument. The Unnoticed themselves, once they had stopped panicking, were at least listening. The nearest Unnoticed, who had become the spokes-creature by proxy, still needed convincing.

'A species' primary function is to survive. Procreate. Endure.'

The Doctor gripped his lapels. 'Not if your entire reason for existence is to pretend you don't exist for fear of changing something in absolute time that may avert your creation. Not existing is your destiny. And haven't you found it all rather. . . wearing?'

'And especially as you cause the accident which creates you in the first place.'

The Doctor did a neck-cricking double take on Rhian. 'They did?'

She nodded. 'Yes. It's obvious, isn't it?'

'Is it?'

Rhian sighed. 'Boy's own adventures are all very well, Doctor, but sometimes you overlook the basics.'

‘I do?’

‘Yes. The Unnoticed are the ultimate paradox. They created themselves.

Today. The same day that they destroy themselves. It’s a closed system. Look at Darlow.’

The Doctor considered Darlow for a moment. His body fused with Gimcrack, fused with Svadhisthana. The shape of twisted flesh that they had become.

Then he looked at the Unnoticed.

‘The energy released from your contact with Carmodi was the potential for the creation of the Unnoticed. She was a capacitor for it and you were the catalyst for releasing that energy. Darlow programmed you to seek her out, thus sealing his fate and that of the Unnoticed. Darlow, Svadhisthana and Gimcrack will be thrown back in time, and over millennia will evolve into the Unnoticed. It’s all very beautiful and contained, really. Much my favourite kind of time travel.’

The Doctor wavered, holding his head. ‘The twisting of soft time around us, elongating the moment – allowing their bodies to fuse and Fitz to remove the Mindbomb from my brain – all part of a closed circuit energy build-up?’

The Unnoticed were beginning to catch on. ‘Unless we destroy ourselves, we will never be created?’

Rhian nodded, vigorously. ‘Yes, all you have to do is for one of you to touch Darlow, complete the circuit, and everything will continue as before.’

The Doctor thumped his fist against the palm of his hand. ‘No! I will not become part of a closed circuit! We are not returning to the beginning and starting all this again! I utterly refuse. There has to be another way.’

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Fitz raised his hand. ‘I could really do with an explanation at this point.’

‘I second that,’ chipped in Anji.

‘We are about to become trapped in a predestination bubble. A temporal backwater where these events, along with their precursors and consequences, will continue ad nauseum. Nauseum being the operative word, especially in relation to the destruction of Antimasque.’

Rhian fixed the Doctor with a bemused smile. ‘It may have happened a million million times already. It’s a natural temporal phenomenon – one that should be allowed to continue untainted by interference.’

‘So now you’ve turned into time travel’s answer to Swampie and his anti-bypass brigade?’ Anji thrust out her chin belligerently. ‘I’ve risked my neck to save yours on several occasions and this is my reward?’

Rhian looked at Anji in the way you might look at a child who was trying to deal with a complicated sum. ‘I know it seems daunting, letting ourselves die now. . . ’

Fitz snorted. ‘Daunting? Well, now you come to mention it. . . ’

‘. . . but it really is quite simple and quite beautiful. I’ve always wanted to have a look inside a closed circuit like this. Who’d have ever thought I’d be part of one?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘Rhian, what about your father?’

‘I just met him on the ship. All this was his idea.’

Darlow was groggily taking all this in, from his uncomfortable position crammed into Gimcrack’s armpit. It didn’t do anything to help his temper that he was destined to become the Unnoticed, but one thing drove him into action.

Spite.

And the direction in which his spite was aimed.

The Doctor took several deep breaths. ‘This is all wrong. This closed circuit shouldn’t exist. The Book shouldn’t exist and the Unnoticed shouldn’t exist!’

‘That’s my point entirely,’ interrupted Rhian. ‘That’s what makes it a closed circuit. It doesn’t interfere with absolute time.’

The Doctor shushed her and continued. ‘The TARDIS tried to warn me

on Lebenswelt; the map to the museum – the route was marked in red! *Red* for danger. Why didn't I see it? Then the blackouts I experienced. Time out of kilter – I'm more sensitive to these things than I imagined. Entering the closed circuit made savage attacks on my psyche. But Darlow's Mindbomb put paid to any more examination of the situation in that direction. I *had* to find Carmodi.

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## The Book of the Still

Was compelled to. Then there was the TARDIS creating a Minus Room just on the off-chance that I would need one? Poppycrack! Balderdash and Perigrew!

The TARDIS obviously made it in advance, for me to use it to break out of the closed circuit! It was an *emergency measure*! A system backup! I've been such a fool. I've used up the one thing I need to break free of this and save Lebenswelt.

And now we're stuck here without the TARDIS, about to witness the completion of the circuit and it all starting again! No. I will not let this happen! Rhian, I refuse. I'm sorry, but I refuse. The circuit cannot be completed.'

Just then, Darlow completed the circuit.

Out of spite.

Fitz had been unable to stop the lumbering Gimcrack from making a despairing grab for the nearest Unnoticed, so engrossed had he been in the Doctor's speech. The three-headed IntroInductions-monster had finally managed to get to its feet while all attention was on the debate between the Unnoticed, Rhian and the Doctor.

Out of the corner of his eye, Fitz had caught a flash of movement, but by the time he'd turned to see what it was, Gimcrack had carried Darlow and Svadhisthana into the midst of the Unnoticed.

The explosion of light physically hurt the backs of Fitz's eyes, as if he'd been pushing his thumbs into them with all his strength. He cowered away from the light and fell as Anji cannoned into him, also trying to avoid the explosion.

The Doctor was yelling with rage and fury, and Rhian was gently applauding the completion of the circuit. Fitz didn't really understand

what was happening, but was fairly sure that things were not going in the way the Doctor wanted.

Especially with all the shouting he was doing. Trying to pick words out of the rush of sounds was difficult, but he was sure that the Doctor was asking for the Book of the Still. Surely that was with Darlow and his exploding buddies?

No. It would seem not.

Fitz chanced opening his eyes and wished that he hadn't. It was as if his vision had split into a kaleidoscope on the shattered air. Shards of images were set in serried ranks around his vision. Anji started in the top corner, was absent from the middle and ended somewhere in the bottom left. *I'll never use fly spray again*, Fitz promised the compound image surrounding him. The Doctor loomed into the centre of the kaleidoscope, eyes wide and hair wild. He was yanking the Book from Carmodi's hands. Where the rest of her body was, he had no idea. But he'd know those hands anywhere. And the voice was definitely Dancing

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hers. 'You can't have it! Stay away. You know what will happen! Stop! I took it from Gimcrack! It's mine!'

There was a bitter chill in the words that froze Fitz's heart in his chest.

And then they were gone.

The Doctor had huddled them all around the Book of the Still.

Anji.

Fitz.

Rhian.

And finally Carmodi, whose wrist he had to forcibly take and place on the cover of the Book, against all her protestations.

The Unnoticed were unmade.

The Tent City disappeared and suddenly they were on the surface of a naked star.

The vortex opened up like a fractal flower. Petals of time, the stems of



events, and the roots of consequences.

Five infinitesimally insignificant figures clinging to the edge of a small book, riding the regressive crest of a tsunami back down a timeline that stretched back to forever.

Dark clawed arms reached from the swirls of geo-chronography, catching at coat tails, pulling away strands of hair.

A howl of deep frustration.

A body fell suddenly away, a despairing lunge and no one connecting.

And then there were four.

A spike of condensed pain on which were the slewed remains of Antimasque, puncturing the vortex like a sliver of solid screaming. They passed with a yell of re-run fear.

Antimasque blossoming with colour.

Remade.

A shiver.

Spat from the vortex on to the cold chill stone of the floor of the Still Room on Lebenswelt.

Fitz coughed blood and Anji rubbed his back uselessly until the wracking convulsions subsided and he could look up. Carmodi was pressed against the wall of the Still Room, holding the Book open on her knees. She was scribbling on the pages with Gimcrack's pen. The top of the page was headed *Epilogue*.

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The Book of the Still

An insubstantial ghost was leaning over her shoulder whispering something about style over content. Carmodi continued to write and hissed something about time travel. The ghost disappeared and Anji couldn't be sure if it had been there at all.

'Who was that?' she asked.

'I was just talking to myself. Forget it,' said Carmodi, getting to her feet and snapping the Book shut. She put the pen behind her ear. 'He

hasn't woken up yet. I checked he was still breathing. Tell him I don't like the way he smells.'

The Doctor was crumpled in a heap at the foot of the dais on which the Book of the Still used to rest. Fitz, getting some sense of his surroundings, asked,

'Where's Rhian?'

'In the future,' said Carmodi quietly.

She made to walk out of the door. Anji blocked her way. 'You can't just leave with the Book.'

'And you're going to stop me?'

'If I have to.'

There was a sigh. 'Let her go, if she wants.'

The Doctor was sitting up, wiping at his eyes and mouth.

Anji fixed him with a hard stare, 'You said the Book shouldn't exist! Surely you can't let her go off with it?'

'The Book shouldn't exist, but it does. It is also the only truly homeostatic artefact in the universe. It exists in all times and places. Take this one, she'd only find another.'

'Too right.'

Fitz walked towards Carmodi. 'Come with us. . . '

'You're drugged. Still. Sorry, you're no longer my type. The Doctor burnt out my addiction. I don't need you any more. You'll get over me. I did.'

'I've been dumped in more. . . sensitive ways.' Fitz turned to the Doctor.

'What does she mean, "burnt out her addiction"?'

The Doctor rubbed his chin. 'When we touched, it caused a release of the potential energy that had been building up since we entered the closed circuit.

We were a critical mass in terms of kicking the whole thing off again.

We just needed to be brought together. Thanks to Darlow's machinations, we were.

Now we're out of the circuit, there is no potential.'

'How did we get out?' Anji was feeling a little ridiculous standing in front of Carmodi with her fists clenched, so she had relaxed her body, and set about joining in the search for answers.

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'The Book brought us back to its last safe resting place, here on Lebenswelt.

One assumes it's a mechanism inbuilt into the Book to keep it available.'

'But how did you know?'

'I reasoned that if I had created the Book, then that's what I would have done, too. Great minds and all that.'

'You took a risk?'

'Yes, Anji – I took a risk.'

'And how do you think that makes me feel?' Carmodi screamed at the Doctor, her eyes bulging, her temples knotted with veins. Spittle clung to her lips.

'I'm sorry?' The Doctor's face was a picture of puzzlement.

'I . . . have. . . nothing. . . left. . . inside!'

Carmodi held her stomach with one hand and waved the Book at the Doctor.

'There are names in here. People important to you. If you use another Book to try to follow me, I'll find them before you, and kill them. Do you understand?'

The Doctor nodded. 'As you wish.'

'You've taken away the only thing that meant anything to me. The Still Point.

Ripped it out of me. You knew what would happen to me but you still took the Book.'

The Doctor was breathing heavily. He cast his eyes down at the floor and spoke quietly. 'I did what I had to do, Carmodi. It's what I always do. Sometimes I wish I didn't have to stand where I stand either.'

Carmodi opened her mouth to speak but in the end said nothing.

She left then.

The Doctor waited a few moments and then took Anji and Fitz by the hand and led them out into the light.

Prologue

*July 7 th*

*11.50 pm*

When they'd got over the initial shock of her entrance, the Unnoticed threw Rhian into the cell aboard the burnt spaceship. She was still aching from dropping out of the vortex at thirty Kartzes plus and hitting the canvas wall of the main meeting area face first. She felt bruised and battered, but at least she had made it. All she had to do now was wait. She reckoned about two to three days should do it.

Casting herself free of the Book and the Doctor had been a risk. But if what she had been told about the nature of predetermination within the closed circuit were true, she was bound to end up here in this cell sooner or later.

There was no escaping it.

Already being prepared for what the Unnoticed looked like (and smelt like) was a definite plus for Rhian, too. She thought back to her first meeting with them – a meeting which, if her chronometer could be believed, had taken place outside the spaceship in the hangar approximately thirty minutes ago, or thereabouts. How she had been both repulsed and fascinated by them – and when she had realised the special place they occupied in absolute time, she had become determined to find out more about them. Well, as much as she could in the minutes she knew they had left.

The cell was uncomfortably warm, the walls dusted with soot and slime.

There was nowhere to sit, so she leant against the wall and waited.

*12:00 am*

The air in the cell rent apart as the fabric of space-time was displaced by the impossible dimensional intrusion of a large blue box. When the grinding and shaking had subsided and the light on top of the box had stopped flashing, the door opened and the Doctor stepped into the cell.

Anji and Fitz followed, and the room was suddenly full. 'Are you sure this is the right gaol?' asked Fitz.

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Prologue

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The Doctor threw Fitz his sternest do-you-doubt-my-abilities-to-programme-the-co-ordinates? look and knelt beside a small box on the floor. The box was black, had a small red light on top, and was partially covered by a note written on a blank page from the Book of the Still.

The Doctor picked up the note and began to read.

His eyebrows were suddenly in danger of pushing his hair off the top of his skull and down his back.

Turning and grabbing Fitz and Anji, he propelled the three of them back into the TARDIS and closed the doors.

The TARDIS dematerialised.

The light on the small black box stopped blinking.

The burnt-black ship imploded.

*11:55 pm*

Rhian hugged her father close while Carmodi finished writing the note. She flicked the concealed switch on the small black box, starting the light, flashing.

Rhian wanted more explanations, but could not be given them. She knew what she had to do, and knew that once she stepped outside of

the cell, Anji would be waiting to help her to get back to the Doctor. She knew because she'd just told herself.

Rhian's future-self stood well back in the corner of the cell, making sure that Carmodi and her father were always in between them. They couldn't risk a short circuit now.

Rhian had quickly explained to herself what she had to do and what to say to convince the Doctor.

'What if he doesn't believe me?'

Rhian smiled. 'Don't worry; these things have a way of working themselves out. Just tell him you've found your father or something. Should do the trick.'

Rhian nodded to herself across the room and smiled. 'I just let go of the Book?'

'Yes,' said Carmodi. 'Now, can we get on, please?'

The door swooshed open, and with a crackle of energy Rhian was thrown out into Anji's arms. The door swooshed closed.

Rhian looked at Carmodi and her father. 'I suppose it's time to go. Where have you parked your time machine?'

Rhian's father smiled and Carmodi laughed aloud, flashing her green eyes and flicking back a chunky lock of her stray hair. 'Time machine? Yeah, right.'

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The Book of the Still

*Dear Doctor,*

*I knew you'd try and rescue Rhian! After all that bullshit about not wanting to be trapped inside a closed circuit, you wait for your time machine to fix itself and throw yourself right back into danger! That is so you.*

*I don't think I've fully forgiven you for what you took away from me*

*– without asking, but seeing as things have turned out relatively OK, I thought I'd give you this one break. I've taken Rhian, and she's safe, so stop looking for her right now. She'll be more than happy with me,*

especially when she sees what I'm using to get about the vortex these days.

Say sorry to Fitz for me, it really wasn't his fault, and he did stick by me when the memory-acids were wearing off. He didn't deserve to be dumped like that. Anyway, plenty more fish in the cosmos, eh?

Oh yes – the one break. The little box with the light on is a Time-bomb.

As in 'TIME'. It'll go off in about three minutes and take the ship completely out of existence.

Quite a lot of complicated stuff is going to happen, But I'm pretty sure (and Rhian's father is 100% convinced) that the circuit will be broken once and for all. And if we're all far enough away, it'll take a good few million years before the unravelling catches up with us. By that time, we should all be long gone.

I'm writing a book about all this. Once I've finished it, I'll think about sending you a copy. Even if I keep having to go back in time to argue with myself about the editing!

Writing fills the hole, you know. . . well, almost.

I'd get going now if I were you.

*Carmodi Litian*

XXX

About the Author

PAUL EBBS has wanted to write a *Doctor Who* novel ever since he realised he could pay off some of his debts by doing so. He is thirty-mumble and has for the last fourteen years worked as a Psychiatric Nurse in some of the least salubrious locations imaginable. He is currently script editor for BBV, and has written for Big Finish. He also writes for the BBC1 medi-soap *Doctors* – and he's really rather happy that it has the word 'Doctor' in the title. He lives in Essex and wholly wishes he didn't.

You will often find him being scarily loud at conventions.

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About the Other Author

RICHARD JONES contributed some of the more *outré* ideas in this

book and then vanished, vowing to one day return and demand a dark and terrible price. Or more likely a drink of some kind. Meanwhile, he's been filling the nebulous post of 'Rehabilitation Co-ordinator' at a Brain Injury Centre and studying part-time for a literature degree. With regard to the latter, he'd be happier if people would stop asking, "So what will you be qualified for at the end of all that?"



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